

**Michel Ned Holte-The Grit And The Oyster (The Bricoleur-NGV Catalogue, October 2009)**

I

In *20 Lines a Day* – a book titled more or less accurately – the American author Harry Mathews records a daily practice, spanning from spring 1983 to summer 1984, of unplanned improvisations that preceded the more ‘serious’ work on his novel *Cigarettes*, and pushed Stendhal’s dictum for writing ‘twenty lines a day, genius or not’ to an almost absurd degree of literalness. ‘It’s a good warm-up exercise I’ve given myself’, Mathews reminds himself on the Day of the Dead:

There’s no conceivable reason not to write twenty lines about anything or something, and twenty lines are enough (would ten or five be equally so?) to banish the hesitancy that breeds telephone calls and household chores and prolongs the reading of newspapers, L. L. Bean catalogues, and articles in *Raritan*.<sup>1</sup>

My reading of Mathews’s book coincided with preparations for writing the essay you are now reading – an essay regarding the recent sculpture of Australian-born, Los Angeles-based artist Ricky Swallow. Maybe it was the unexpected mention of L. L. Bean, but I immediately began to draw connections between Mathews’s nose-to-the-grindstone routine and Swallow’s labor-intensive approach to sculpture (as well as my own tendency to procrastinate about writing).

With Stendhal providing the only rule, so to speak, Mathews’s daily passages, most written in a single sitting, cover an enormous range of ideas and impulses, from the names of birds to descriptions of rooms to the dread of looking into the mirror to the recent death of his close friend Georges Perec. Some of Mathews’s warm-ups are surely bagatelles – ‘throwaways’ retained in order to stay true to the initial premise – but what emerges through an accumulation of glancing blows is a side-winding, profoundly unhurried (and often profound) meditation on *the grand themes* – life, death, and the complicated sandwich of time in-between. This, to me at least, parallels the uncanny charge or gravitas of Swallow’s precisely carved sculptures that gradually emerge from raw blocks of jelutong or English limewood.

‘I still think the time invested in a piece’, Swallow has noted, ‘is somehow contained or embalmed in the object in the final result’.<sup>2</sup> But, how does that actually happen? At what point in the gradual process of a work’s becoming, I wonder, does the essence of that thing reveal itself?

## II

*Bowman's record* is a cast bronze sculpture of an archer's cardboard target that Swallow found in a field near his home. Rectangular and wall-bound, it occupies the space of a painting; with its pocked, monochromatic surface, one approaches it – almost inevitably – like one approaches an abstract painting. The mystery of the target's punctured surface is resolved by the straightforward title of the work, if not in attention to its visible details; abstraction quickly slips over to representation. As Swallow explains:

I like [the targets] because they are made by incident rather than purpose, which is so opposite to what I do in the studio. Yet they are produced with this traditional, even romantic practice of archery in an attempt for the individual to better their skill. So, they are records of this anonymous endeavor made plastic.<sup>3</sup>

*Bowman's record* is indexical: it reveals a process but little other information. The order in which the marks were made is impossible to discern, but it hardly matters. Like many of Swallow's sculptures, a found target is an accumulation, a quiet monument to repetition and time passing – what the artist calls a 'preserved readymade'.

Still, I wonder if it is indeed possible to set 'incident' and 'purpose' apart as binary opposites. Like Mathews's writing routine, what may seem incidental or improvised in the heat of the moment often reveals its target – or a larger sense of purpose – over time.

## III

'Woodshedding' is a slang term for practicing guitar. Another is 'noodling', but noodling implies aimlessness whereas woodshedding suggests industriousness, if not tangible results. Perhaps no one better fits that description than British guitarist Derek Bailey who wrote the book – literally – on improvisation.<sup>4</sup> The overwhelming majority of Bailey's recorded output – spanning nearly forty years of playing on acoustic and electric guitar, alone and in a wild assortment of group contexts – is freely improvised. The trick for keeping improvisation fresh, I'm guessing, is in negotiating the perilous terrain between incident and purpose without getting completely lost in the wilderness along the way. 'What are you improvising with or around?' Bailey once asked aloud.

You've got to find somewhere where you can work. If there are no difficulties, it seems to me that there's pretty much no point in playing. I find that the things that excite me are trying to make something work. And when it does work, it's the most fantastic thing. Maybe the most obvious analogy would be the grit that produces the pearl in an oyster, or some shit like that.<sup>5</sup>

Swallow, who paid tribute to the guitarist with a carving of a man's right arm, *Unbroken ways (For Derek Bailey)*, recently described him as 'Buddy Holly's cooler brother'.<sup>6</sup> But for a listener unaccustomed to improvised music – or occasional outbursts of abrasive atonality – Bailey's idiosyncratic twang might initially sound like somebody who just picked up a guitar for the first time. Recordings of Bailey preserve what is, in essence, a confrontation with the everlasting now. On repeated and careful listening, however, one can hear the gentle scrape of the grit inside the oyster.

## IV

Acorn barnacles begin as feathery, free-swimming creatures distantly related to shrimp. Unlike shrimp, however, the barnacles soon relinquish the swimming life and settle down for the long haul by supergluing themselves to a hard surface – a dock, a ship, a buoy, the shell of another being. Once attached, barnacles construct a rock-hard limestone shell that appears somewhat like a sprouting succulent (or the punctured hole of the archer's target, scaled up) and, when necessary, extend their delicate tentacles into the water to grope for passing plankton. Barnacles are hermaphrodites but mate with their neighbors, and therefore tend to gather in dense colonies. This accumulation of barnacles is often rapid and exponential, and several tons of gathered barnacles can drag a massive ship to a slow crawl in just a few years.

## V

*Caravan* is a bronze trio of balloons, plump but grounded. Each balloon is covered with a cluster of acorn barnacles. The title seems to refer to both the barnacles and the balloons and the tendency to encounter each of these objects en masse. (One can imagine more balloons at rest around the corner.)

*Caravan* recalls Swallow's *Younger than yesterday*, a sculpture in which a human skull is adorned with outcroppings of barnacles. The skull, like the balloon, rests on the floor; the balloon in size and shape approximately recalls the skull. In the earlier sculpture carved English limewood brings together human bone and the barnacles' limestone exoskeleton, but the materials are already not-so-distant, calcified cousins: unlikely, but not unlike.

But with *Caravan*, bronze casting unifies the unlikely and improbable: slow-growing, hard-armored sea creatures budding from short-lived, thin-skinned objects. The airiness of the balloon is made dense, heavy and monumental in bronze, but the paradox operating here is as much one of time as one of material: balloons, prone to flightiness, sudden escapes beyond reach and even more sudden explosions of self-annihilation, are coaxed into a lasting relationship by the tenacious barnacles.

## VI

Swallow is a collector – of records, of books, of Japanese hand tools, of ceramics, of furniture and lamps, of T-shirts and denim, of backpacks and tote bags, of parkas and quilted vests, of inflatable rafts, of hardwood, of button badges, of bandanas and other textiles, of hats and caps, of sunglasses, and of scuba fins, among other things. Many of these objects – or images of them – appear on Swallow's blog, *Ready for the House*, which he updates on an almost-daily basis, or they accumulate above the desk in his studio (alongside notes, reminders and song titles written in ALL CAPS on Post-it notes with a thick black marker).<sup>7</sup> Some of these things – or exacting replicas, translated into materials like wood or bronze – eventually appear as 'the work', but one gets the sense that the meticulous examination and placement and reorganization of all this beloved stuff is as much a part of his everyday labor as woodcarving, filing or bronze casting, if not more so.

## VII

John Fahey's steel-string acoustic guitar music, self-defined as 'American Primitive', is usually found in the 'Folk' bins at the record store, but could be placed just as awkwardly in at least a half-dozen other inadequate containers. Fahey, who recorded his first album using the name Blind Joe Death, was born under the sign of Pisces in 1939 and died just six days short of his 62nd birthday in 2001 while riding a new wave of recognition by a generation of younger fans discovering his inimitable approach to woodshedding.

While no stranger to improvisation or atonal explorations that find kinship with someone like Derek Bailey, Fahey's playing is largely guided by a different star: radical compositional structure, along with a musicological (even museological) reverence for sonic passages extracted from the recent and distant past.<sup>8</sup> Fahey is a collector, a *bricoleur*, who can jumpcut together two or more strange bedfellows in a single song like a mixed metaphor that somehow rings true. In the paradoxically titled 'Stomping Tonight on the Pennsylvania/Alabama Border', for example, Fahey gathers a blues lick from Skip James, a motif from the Gregorian chant 'Dies Irae', and a passage from Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Sixth Symphony*.<sup>9</sup> Other Fahey tunes likewise draw upon raga, bluegrass and military waltzes; he returns to certain motifs over and over, like a familiar kit of parts, but the organization of the motifs keeps changing. The mastery of Fahey's fingerpicking approach allows the guitar to unify these discrete fragments while leveling any hierarchy between them.

It comes as no surprise that Fahey's music often haunts Swallow's studio. Swallow's sculptures usually take familiar objects from the world (balloons, barnacles, backpacks) and often specifically or allusively borrow from art history (skulls, snakes, Donatello's praying Mary Magdalene) and put these things together in unforeseen ways, using materials such as wood or bronze much like Fahey uses the guitar to unify 'this' and 'that' (skull and barnacles; balloon and barnacles) into a new whole that looks astonishing, uncanny. We're not talking about hybrids here, or Frankenstein monsters, but specific things-in-the-world that are brought together to form a marriage of sorts where the individual things somehow maintain their identity and autonomy.

As I'm writing this, Swallow is carving a complex linear arrangement in which an assortment of seashells, a desert rose and some pocket change all nestle in a hooded sweatshirt draped over a long wood block – a multipart still life the artist describes as 'a scattered tomb of sorts [...] akin to a group of offerings left, grave tokens or personal effects'.<sup>10</sup> As with the relatively simpler juxtapositions, the components are individually recognizable, but the whole is unified in material – if not as a concept. The trick that both Fahey and Swallow accomplish is making the transition from 'this' to 'that' seamless and startling at the same time.

## VIII

The human skull – a familiar figure of death that looms over pop culture and art history alike – appears so frequently in Swallow's body of work you might call it a recurring character: in the aforementioned *Younger than yesterday*, barnacles sprout, symbiotically, from a skull's complex topology; in *Come together*, a skull is deeply embedded, tragicomically, in the seat of a beanbag, as if hurled from across the room like a shot put; and in *Everything is nothing*, the skull, lying on its side, is partially wrapped in a hood cut cleanly from a sweatshirt – just as the skull was severed from its body. Other works point to the skull without directly representing it – for example, the bone-like bicycle helmet upended and holding writhing snakes in *The arrangement*. 'There's empathy in death and to monuments specifically, that I'm trying to reach', Swallow has asserted. 'Something beautiful beyond decay, within a structure both poetic and formal'.<sup>11</sup>

In *Fig. 1* a rounded but aspherical object is loosely shrouded in folded, crinkled paper – all masterfully carved from a single block of limewood – but never clearly identifies itself as a skull. At first glance one might see *Fig. 1* as an ‘abstraction’ – much like *Bowman’s record*, with which it was first exhibited.<sup>12</sup> But, the fidelity of the paper sheath is too exacting – too papery – to trust that initial impulse.

So, what’s lurking in there? Given Swallow’s ongoing, almost-magnetic attraction to the object, it’s impossible to see it as anything but a skull, the figure of death wrapped in time. As Swallow has observed:

When something ends, it becomes sculpture, a commemoration of a prior life or energy, fixing it against a perishing time. There is both a sustained time period within the narrative of my sculptures and the sustained time period through how they’re produced as carvings in the studio. It seems time is still the main thing looming over the works.<sup>13</sup>

The act of apprehending *Fig. 1* hardly matches the amount of time Swallow invested in making it, yet the viewer is pointed to an unfolding process of discovery, one in which the sculpture’s secret keeps death at the door until that charged moment of inevitability.

## IX

Is there some levity in discovering that Swallow learned to carve such intricate and haunting memento mori by reading a how-to book titled *Carving Realistic Birds?*<sup>14</sup> Swallow did indeed carve a life-sized bird – his namesake – and nested it in a Gola-brand sneaker carved from matching wood in *Together is the new alone*. But, following this glued union, he created seamless juxtapositions in the act of carving each sculpture from a single (or laminated) block of wood: an addition by removal.

*Fig. 2* is a backpack carved from a block of jelutong, but is a somewhat anomalous work for Swallow because there is no such juxtaposition of objects. Swallow has a remarkable gift for making wood look uncannily like canvas or paper – soft, pliable. The backpack is filled, but not quite to capacity: we don’t know what’s inside it; there is no suggestion offered. There is some hint of a narrative, but no proverbial breadcrumbs to follow – only form, exteriority.

The titles *Fig. 1* and *Fig. 2* imply textbook illustrations – and Swallow has surely seen his share of them – but they also refer to the human figure. *Fig. 1* veils its skull; *Fig. 2* calls forth a torso in its very absence.

## X

In 2005 Derek Bailey died of motor neuron disease, anticipated by the onset of carpal tunnel syndrome. No longer able to grip a pick, the guitarist decided against surgery to relieve the constrictions of the disorder (not to mention retirement), resolving instead to adapt his approach to plucking the strings – essentially relearning the instrument in the seventh decade of his life. A recording of this process – Bailey’s last – made over the course of twelve weeks and bluntly titled *Carpal Tunnel*, clearly intimates the struggle of a virtuoso after losing his ‘chops’. But the results in this case are somehow more bracing than depressing: Bailey’s approach to the instrument was always one of openness and fluid exploration; the notion of failure was not denied but deferred in favor of delineating the very precipice from which one might fall. And that precipice is the reason one listens.

## XI

Like *Unbroken ways (For Derek Bailey)* before it, *Rehearsal for retirement* fragments the human body – a right arm in the former, two bare feet in the latter. Both sculptures are carved from limewood with chisels and knives, but are left unfiled and therefore somewhat rough – akin to a traditional German woodcarving that, according to the artist, ‘maybe even pushes it back in time a little’.<sup>15</sup>

The right foot steps on the prone left foot, or perhaps the latter props up the former. To imagine the whole body is to imagine simultaneous movement and stasis. The feet are accompanied by a desert rose, a crystalline gypsum form that accumulates in sandy environments and resembles a grooved piece of fruit.

The work’s title is borrowed from the Phil Ochs album *Rehearsals for Retirement*, issued in 1969. With gallows humor, the album cover features a photograph of a tombstone with the singer’s name carved into it, positing the word ‘retirement’ as a grim understatement. On the song ‘My Life’ Ochs sings, paradoxically, ‘My life is now a death to me’, and on the grave marker his death is dated to

August 1968 – coinciding with the violent protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and preceding the singer’s actual death, by his own hands, seven years later.

## XII

*The man from Encinitas* is not a skull, but perhaps it works the same way. The human head upon which it is based belongs to Cranston Montgomery, the strikingly named craftsman with whom Swallow works when casting bronze. The sculpture is chalk-white plaster, an interstitial material in the process of metal casting – the part that usually gets thrown away. Held aloft from a raw onyx base, the head is far from polished, at least by Swallow’s standards; it’s complete and resolved but *somehow not yet finished*. This may be the intended figure of speech.

Montgomery suffered cardiac arrest while surfing and lost consciousness. Underwater, he was revived by the repeated crashing of waves that slammed his body to the shore and, with an accumulation of powerful oceanic blows, jostled his heart back to life. *The man from Encinitas* is a death mask, in other words, but one of death deferred. With eyes closed but chin held up defiantly, the figure exists between life and death, both in and out of time’s grasp: at peace on the precipice.

## Notes

- 1 Harry Mathews, *20 Lines a Day*, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, IL, 1988, p. 60.
- 2 Ricky Swallow, quoted in Justin Paton, *Ricky Swallow: Field Recordings*, Craftsman House, Fishermans Bend, 2004, p. 13.
- 3 Ricky Swallow, email to the author, May 2009.
- 4 See Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1980.

5 Phil Freeman, interview with Derek Bailey, *Jazziz*, March 2002, online at <http://www.bagatellen.com/archives/frontpage/001106.html>

6 Swallow, email.

7 See <http://www.ready4thehouse.blogspot.com/>. The title 'Ready for the House' is taken from an album of the same name by a mysterious Houston-based musician using the moniker 'Jandek'. Initially attributed to The Units and released by Corwood Industries in 1978, *Ready for the House* was later re-issued, re-attributed to Jandek, and is the first album of his sprawling discography. The album cover features a photograph of an easy chair and window in a living room that is generally presumed to be Jandek's. Swallow notes that 'fans have tried to piece his life together from details gleaned from the covers – in this case, identifying the novels on the window sill and coffee table' (email to the author, June 2009).

8 Fahey received a master's degree in folklore and published a well-regarded dissertation on bluesman Charley Patton. Fahey's later recordings veered away from the vernacular song form to more fully embraced noise and atonality. In 1997 Fahey's Revenant Records released Derek Bailey's album *Music and Dance*, a freeform collaboration with Japanese dancer Min Tanaka. It's also curious to note that late in his own career, Bailey recorded *Standards*, an album of interpretations of old jazz and pop classics for the Tzadik label.

9 British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) was, like Fahey, a scholar of vernacular music.

10 Swallow, email, June 2009.

11 'Gerald Matt in conversation with Ricky Swallow', in *Ricky Swallow: Younger Than Yesterday* (Kunsthalle Vienna), Verlag für Moderne Kunst, Nürnberg, Germany, 2007, p. 65.

12 Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles, 2008.

13 'Gerald Matt in conversation with Ricky Swallow'.

14 See David Tippery, *Carving Realistic Birds*, Sterling, New York, 1996.

15 Swallow, email, June 2009.

**Justin Paton- *The Weight Of Paper* (Watercolors, UQ Museum, July 2009)**

There is nothing like moving house to remind you of the stubbornness of objects. From the fridge to the bed to the table, all the things that usually help you through the day suddenly turn into sullen obstacles. What I hadn't expected to come up against, when my family and I recently moved to a new city, was the weight and stubbornness of paper.

After all, a piece of paper is nothing much – so light it's barely there. The fact that paper weighs so little must be one of the reasons why I hadn't thrown any of it out for almost a decade. As the staff at the check-in counter say when your luggage tips the scales, it's always paper that puts you over the limit. And, on moving day, there all my paper was – piece after piece of it, deposited over the years into whichever cardboard box was nearest. Payslips, ticket stubs, fridge-door farewells, every comic I had bought as a kid, every drawing made by my own kids, a diary that never made it past 18 January, articles torn from magazines for future reading, and, above all, the notes to self and middle-of-the-night memorandums that seemed *absolutely* important at the time, but which had drifted slowly deeper in the reef of stuff.

One threat these boxes posed was backache; the other was to my time. I couldn't go near them without drifting into a kind of appalled reverie, standing there wondering what on earth I meant when I scribbled 'utopian slumps' on the back of an envelope. Even more dangerous was the temptation to 'sort it all out', to go through these fragments and try to compress them into some more respectable form – the filing cabinet to end all filing cabinets. But there simply wasn't time. And besides, after several doomed attempts to thin out the piles, I began to like these bulging boxes of scraps. Instead of regarding them as the slightly shameful evidence of thoughts not yet processed, I began to think of them as stubbornly satisfying objects – evidence, albeit sometimes impossible to decipher, that something actually happened. So much of life just blows right past us, a flutter of thoughts, small events and conversations. I now take a perverse pleasure in the fact that pieces of paper have ended up marking time so weightily.

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The first time I saw a large group of Ricky Swallow's watercolours, they were not lined up in a row on a gallery wall, but taken out one by one from a box. There were studies of museum displays, vaporous monkeys, extinct animals, and drifting underwater scenarios, but what I remember as vividly as the subjects of these paintings was the physical presence of the paintings themselves. In fact, the word 'painting' seems too grand and solid for works so quiet in tone and light in touch. Some were still in sketchbooks, some had clearly come from them, and many of them had soaked up so much liquid colour that their surfaces were wrinkled and puckered. Looking at Swallow's aquatic images, full of bathyspheres and undersea creatures, it was easy to imagine the pages having come from the long-lost diary of a deep-ocean explorer. Indeed, their surfaces were so fluid – so full of runs, backwashes, blooms and drifts of colour – it seemed that the whole box-load might itself have been retrieved from the ocean.

Since then I've seen Swallow's watercolours in dealer galleries, public galleries, art fairs, and in catalogues like this one. Each time, though, I go back in memory to that first out-of-the-box encounter, and the way the works felt like something accidentally discovered rather than officially presented to the world. While I'm glad that Swallow's watercolours are now finding their way, framed and insured, into this substantial survey exhibition, that shouldn't stop us from noticing that these works remain committedly casual, made in the downtime weeks between Swallow's labour-intensive wood carvings, and rendered with an atmospheric looseness that often surprises those who know only his sculptures. As always when watercolours find their way to large institutional walls, the challenge is to honour their casual and modest qualities, rather than anxiously explain them away. Instead of dragging Swallow's watercolours to centre stage and loudly proclaiming them neglected, better to follow them out to the edges of his practice, and notice how they make their modesty meaningful.

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You might expect watercolour's inbuilt modesty to make artists stay away. How is anyone going to claim attention in a format so retiring and quiet? In fact, the opposite is the case. Over the last 10 or so years, watercolour has enjoyed a quiet renaissance in the hands of artists looking for an alternative to big gallery spaces and the big art that predictably fills them. For Swallow, the very things that give watercolour such a marginal, trembling place in the public gallery hierarchy are at the heart of its appeal. Instead of delivering a museum-sized visual hit, legible from 50 paces and instantly memorable, his watercolours insist that we go to them and attend closely to whatever is emerging from the spills of paint. They're more like letters sent from one person to another than speeches addressed to a crowd.

How do the watercolours relate, then, to Swallow's hard-won wooden sculptures, which update the themes and objects of seventeenth-century *vanitas* for the twenty-first century? Light where the sculptures are heavy, atmospheric where the sculptures are sharp, the watercolours are rendered with a swiftness that could well seem too easy after the demands of chisels and files. But the watercolours also dwell on *vanitas* themes – on mortality and longevity – and their very softness tells us something useful about how Swallow's work relates to that tradition. To say that he paints skulls or skeletons is only the beginning of the story. What matters as much as the obvious subjects of the work is the way those subjects are altered and inflected in the telling, the way he seems to be coaxing them out from some blurry place or releasing them back into it.

In other words, the watercolours remind us that Swallow's relation with the *vanitas* tradition isn't direct or unquestioning. Rather, it's hesitant, fluid and wondering. When Swallow floats a skull and dead creatures on the four sheets of *All things must pass vol. 1–4*, we have no trouble discerning an update on the still life theme; here human death takes its place alongside the deaths of other creatures. But the work doesn't come at you with the almost taunting moral conviction of a traditional *vanitas* painting, such as Dutch artist Jan Treck's *Vanitas still life* (1648), where the skull dares you to luxuriate in all the surrounding visual glory that cannot be taken beyond the grave. In Swallow's variation, the skull and its animal companions float on strange flat fields of colour, like things whose place in our world has yet to be determined. The brushwork that describes them seems tender and curious about these objects, rather than settled in its opinions of them.

It's as if Swallow is testing these images, setting them down lightly on paper so he can gauge their current worth. The culture and belief system that produced seventeenth-century still life painting is now mostly gone, or at least vastly changed. Are those symbols and forms still useful to us, or are they simply props and relics past their prime? If they are depleted and redundant, what becomes of

the meanings once attached to them? And which forms should we reach for in their place? What Swallow finds in watercolour, I think, is a way to hold on to those forms, but very lightly. To pick them up like a rumour.

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The main actors in Swallow's early watercolours are intelligent and faintly menacing monkeys. They read books, operate laptops, listen through headphones, pilot spaceships towards other worlds, and generally run the show. Swallow records their actions and antics with all the enthusiasm of a field researcher with notebook flipped open: here they are reading books; there they are fondling guns. It's zoology shaded by comedy, a kind of diary of evolutionary downfall. And like William Hogarth's many eighteenth-century paintings and engravings featuring preening and puffed-up monkeys, these watercolours are not about monkeys but rather us humans. They are about our flailing and preposterous attempts to make progress, get ahead, extend ourselves in space and time. Whether they are tinkering with gadgets, piloting spacecraft, spraying graffiti on walls, or creating fresh versions of themselves in the lab, Swallow's monkeys might all be considered surrogate artists, using whatever is at their disposal to reach beyond themselves. The resulting watercolours are science fictions of a comic and wondering kind, gently dwelling on the absurdity of our efforts to make ourselves known in a limitless universe.

Leaf through Swallow's recent watercolours, however, and the monkeys in their sci-fi settings fade completely from view. In their place come human faces and figures of a much more certain vintage. These watercolours are based on photographs – though 'based' sounds too solid for what happens in them. It is as if each portrait were placed in the opposite of developing fluid, a substance that softens the certainty of the photographic record and takes it to the edge of dissolution. The face seen close up in *When you were gone* is almost lost in the pooling pigment. The paired faces in *False true lovers* look at once stunned and accused by our interest in them. The faces of members of the legendary Kelly Gang are rendered in bruised blacks and blues, and look by turns malevolent (*Ned*), wretched (*James Kelly*), and too far gone to care (*Hanging Joe Byrne*). The same faces receive an unexpected second life in watercolours that portray the outlaw Ned as played by rock star Mick Jagger in the 1970 film *Ned Kelly* – pop cultural memory bleeding back across colonial history. Of all the faces Swallow portrays, none haunt his watercolours as persistently as those of musicians. From John Fahey and Nick Drake through to the reedy, melancholy figure of 'Papa John' Phillips, co-writer of 'California dreamin'', musicians form a kind of shadow community within Swallow's art – half-hip and half-haunted, an unlikely aristocracy of shaggy man-boys, wistful skinnies, and finger-picking

daddy-os.

Swallow is known to be an obsessive listener, someone whose art is motivated as much by music as by the work of other visual artists. Since moving to Los Angeles he has immersed himself in Californian music of the 1960s and '70s. On that count, these watercolours might be considered the notes of a fan, Swallow transferring these faces from album covers into the scrapbook of his own enthusiasms. If this is fandom, though, it's fandom of a peculiar kind, tender and yet thoroughly distanced. In the photos that he selects, the musicians adopt the role of reluctant prophets, modern-day troubadours, staring past or through the camera towards some horizon of possibility. Like Francis Upritchard, Damiano Bertoli and David Noonan, to name just three artists of Swallow's generation who are also reaching into the archive of this period, Swallow seems obscurely attracted to the mixture of hope and melancholy in these images – the way they sit on the fault line between 1960s idealism and the disenchantments of the 1970s. The closer he goes to these faces, the more puzzling their presence becomes. No longer joined together in hippy solidarity, the faces in *The hangman's beautiful portraits* (based on a photograph of an Incredible String Band album cover) turn solemn, strange and old. The musicians in *One nation underground* seem to pass from currency before our eyes, presented like fragments peeled from a fan's album, or busts in a museum of antiquities. By turning this period's pop stars into figments and monuments, Swallow does justice to an odd aspect of memory, which is the way faces and events from the recent past often feel further away from us than those from centuries past. We walk through our lives buoyed by the illusion that the crucial details are right there – that we can reach into the filing cabinet of memory and find just what we need. But, as I discovered when I started digging down into the boxes of paper in my garage, even your self of five or 10 years ago can feel like someone unfamiliar. Thirty-odd years since their heyday, Swallow's musicians waver on the brink of unfamiliarity. They're halfway between going and gone.

So is Swallow farewelling these figures or bringing them back? Reclaiming them or letting them go? In the end I think the watercolours must be counted as acts of commemoration – modest, indistinct and partial, certainly, but commemorative acts nonetheless. The evidence for this lies in the simple fact that he made them in the first place. Having listened to their music and looked at their photos, he set to work with paper and brush. And what led him to do so, I suspect, was not the looking so much as the listening. Songs bring the past vividly into the present because voices are such intimate things. Push play on a recording and the voice of someone long-gone is right there with you all of a sudden. Little wonder that Edison's phonograph recordings were once thought to offer the chance to listen in on the dead.

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One of the reasons that watercolour is known as a minor medium is its sheer vulnerability. Visit the storerooms of almost any public gallery and you'll find the oil paintings waiting on racks, robust and ready for viewing. Watercolours, by contrast, are the recluses of the painting world, hiding out in wide, cool, dark drawers or in archival Solander boxes. To see one you have to put on white gloves and lift away a sheet of tissue, an act that always feels to me like something that might happen in a morgue. When such works are released for public viewing, it is for short periods and under lighting so low that they seldom have a chance to shine. The very things that give watercolours their life – their transparency and atmospheric lightness – also make conservators fear for them.

But the very things that inspire fear in conservators inspire something different in Swallow. For an artist obsessed with what lasts, what medium could be better than one that is itself troublesomely mortal? One work in particular pushes this tension to a wonderful extreme. *A sad but very discreet recollection of beloved things and beloved beings* is a sequence of 10 pages devoted to corpses from the burial catacombs of Palermo, Sicily, where bodies rest in underground niches, fully clothed in the fashion of the day and visited regularly by relatives. One of Swallow's deathliest watercolour sequences, it is also one of his most alive, because the corpses are dressed in clothing of carnival brightness – the kind of high, lively brightness that watercolour especially makes possible.

Watercolour is commonly assumed to be the medium best suited to light or minor subjects; some flowers would be suitable, or a dawn light on a hillside. With its band of bright corpses, *A sad but very discreet recollection* nicely undoes this piece of received wisdom. Here, the lightest of mediums proves to be the perfect vehicle for the heaviest subject of all. For me, this combination of the light and the sombre is what makes Swallow's paper trail worth following. And this combination also oddly affirms what I discovered in my garage, where all those scraps of paper have taken on an unexpected mass. The watercolours are just pieces of paper, after all – vulnerable, light-shy, easily overlooked. But, following the trail for a while and picking up the pieces, I find myself surprised by the weight.

***Jon Bywater-Later That Same Year* (Younger Than Yesterday-Kunsthalle  
Vienna, November 2007)  
Later That Same Year**

Walking down by the mangroves, the air is cold and muddy. At the bend in the creek I first notice the salty smell, the first hint of the harbour. Trodden into this route for me is the expectation of seeing a heron, a reassuring persistence of the still, indigenous bird here on the edge of the city; but

this grey spring afternoon the movement, a darting, that tugs the idea into mind, is just a rat on the far bank, and then the white flutter, moving gently in the distance, comes into view as a supermarket bag snagged. I stop to crouch and look, down amongst the upright shoots. The dried mud is cracked and lifting like peeling paint. Against the wire mesh of the boundary fence small, hard dead leaves are caked into a thick, dry drift. A curl of orange rind and silver sliver of sweet wrapper loom brightly in the shade. A sipper bottle is caught in the crook of a branch, silted, grainy, faded, stuck.

Of all the things people could say from the outside, platitudes about the healing power of time finally seemed the wisest. What can seem confounding is that once someone has construed something a certain way, settled on their version of the story, a dimming through forgetting is the only way that the hurt and regret it entails will dissipate. Having it out, getting things clear, becomes a useless fantasy, the dynamic that spoiled things too easily replayed.

Beginning about seven years ago, I started to buy solo albums from the early 1970s on Elektra. Next to their commercial successes with Bread, the Doors and Carly Simon, things like the Dennis Coulson LP (eponymous) must have barely sold. He was the singer from the dull English "super group" McGuinness Flint. Courtland Pickett (Fancy Dancer) was in American "one-hit wonders" Sailcat, who had been Elektra artists. Dylan-esque folk singer and "musician's musician" Paul Siebel made two records with them (Woodsmoke and Oranges, jack-knife gypsy). Also in this company - like Terry Melcher (eponymous), who worked with the Beach Boys and the Byrds, and hit rockabilly songwriter Jack Clement (All I Want To Do In Life) - Marlin Greene was an industry guy. He had worked with Dan Penn, and co-written "When A Man Loves A Woman" with Eddie Hinton. His lone LP, Tiptoe Past The Dragon, is not much recognised by fans or collectors, but its lost and forgotten quality adds to the appeal now for me of its wistful, gently psychedelic country rock. It comes from what seems like a turning point in the music industry, where the lesson was learned that looking after its own, and hanging onto people primarily for their musical skills was not a profitable option.

By the time he got down the coast to his friend's place the mixtape had played through several times. The anticipation of certain transitions from song to song almost made him want to keep driving to hear them through again to the end of the side. Leaving, he'd put the tape on and had to eject it straight away. A sense of significance was already too vivid, his chest splashed with adrenaline, the stories and refrains that might narrate things too cluttering. He sat with the sound of the road for a while, before pushing it back into the player. The second side had a greater ease about it, he decided that morning, as though the decisions about what to record had achieved a better flow by that point in the tape making, at least two years ago now.

Goodbyes can begin before you're aware of it. As we shared lunch, a determined enjoyment, that came from the sense of borrowed time, was like a protection to wear against the parting. Our gaiety was resolute, in an attempt to put aside the knowledge of the never again, of the no going back, of the leaving due to take place. Peeling fruit, sipping coffee, we are trying to make it OK for one another, not to dwell on things, moving in this removed but sincere way through the sequence that will end with the exchange of looks, the embraces, and then the turning away and walking out of sight. In the same way that it creeps up on us beforehand, the goodbye will also outlast that clearly identifiable moment out in the street by the car, a hand raised to the window, as later each of us will find ourselves gone or on our own, and notice where we are, a little of us left behind, a little of us taken away.

**Gerald Matt in Conversation with Ricky Swallow (Younger Than Yesterday-Kunsthalle Vienna, November 2007)**

**Gerald Matt in Conversation with Ricky Swallow**

When something ends, it becomes sculpture, a commemoration of a prior life or energy, fixing it against a perishing time.

**I first saw your work in the Australian pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2005. It fascinated me, not least because it seemed quite different from anything else I saw at that Biennale. Is 'different' a category you are often confronted with?**

I guess the work did strike people as unexpected in the context of Venice, where a lot of large installation and video work is shown. It's strange because when I'm in Venice I feel like I'm surrounded – even followed – by sculptures protruding from architecture and keeping watch over Palazzos. And I wanted to extend that feeling into the context of my show in the pavilion. I had in mind to slow the audience down, to allow for an encounter with tactile objects, which also relates directly to how the works are made. I think different is ok, provided it's a category that can be integrated and approached critically like anything else. To be 'different' in form indicates taking a different approach to the idea of the problem, sculpture being the problem.

**You work with the classical techniques of sculpture, carving objects from wood with your own hands, and recently you have discovered bronze for yourself. Traditional skills, your hands-on production – these seem to have a special value to you. One of your watercolors shows a genuinely conservative understanding of yourself as an artist, a sculptor with hammer and chisel.**

The traditional skills I employ are tactics to keep myself from becoming an obsolescent medium within my own practice. It's funny how scandalous the idea of the artist as someone who spends time making things with their hands in the studio can seem now. I've always liked images of artists working. It's a romantic depiction, but a successful image conveying something of the transfer of gesture or action into form, the kind of hidden performance behind an artwork. There is a really beautiful photograph of Paul Thek with hammer and chisel in hand, working on a plaster cast of his own foot which I love, and a photo of Guiseppe Penone carving one of his log works has been on my studio wall for years. I'm attracted to these images because they remind me that sculpture solicits some kind of exchange with materials. Traditional skills definitely have a value for me, and I always find it hard to define exactly why: It could be as simple as maintaining a closeness to the work through the participation in it's making, literally being responsible for a form from its conception to its completion. And once it's completed, there's this relief of not being connected to it anymore, it's resolution or autonomy finally announcing itself.

**Playing with established hierarchies of genre aesthetics clearly has a special charm for you. You produce in a certain sense hyper-realistic, incredibly finely worked objects with traditional woodcraft combining them with Pop-Art motifs; but the realism is disturbed by the visibility of the materials, which is reminiscent of the classicistic attitude of the 19th century, when undisguised material qualities stood for purity and beauty. In exhibition situations you present your 'everyday objects', such as a BMX bike, a PC or a cyclist's helmet, in darkened rooms with dramatic lighting effects, and often in glass cases, too. The banal and trivial is staged in an auratic way. In contrast to that you place your sculptures on the floor without a pedestal. In an earlier phase, you used to make objects from plastic or cardboard, mostly framed in colour. How did this contrast come about?**

I get nervous about the term pop motifs because I think it suggests something other than what I'm interested in. Most of the everyday objects I've used in my sculptures have a very 'used' quality, and often hold some kind of promise, such as the replica of my family telescope or even the BMX bike, in how it offers mobility/independence to the homebound teenager. The purity of my materials or finish is something that links all my works; mediums definitely carry messages (isn't that what people got to mediums for?). This becomes obvious when you think about how a work would fail in a different medium, even the weight of something changes its nature conceptually. I've always thought of my sculptures as propositions, as prototypes of preserved static form. They have a distilled quality, just south of functionality, and the pure materials I've chosen, usually monotone with matt surfaces, are appropriate. The mediums have partially led to specific objects and vice versa, which explains how the subjects changed when I started working in wood and more recently, in bronze. Installing a show is setting this trap, and the best bait to draw an audience seems to be to remove any distraction. The pedestals and display devices have been jettisoned to encourage a more intimate encounter than one is afforded in a museum. A big part of the sculptures is the gravity and relationship they have to the ground and I don't like to tamper with that ... how strange would it be to come across shells placed on plinths whilst beachcombing. I also think the lighting is crucial and has the function of bringing out the form in the sculptures; it comes from the lighting often employed in still life paintings, which plays on both the painted surface and material surface of the subject.

**You had a look at the exhibition space in Vienna in advance. Afterward the idea was born to conceive the exhibition as an enormous glass case. Due to the glass walls and the visibility from outside, the project space has a special quality. The glass case is also a way of presenting ethnographic objects or historical documents, and has connotations such as archive, cultural memory and historic past, but also intimacy and seclusion.**

I like the idea of the space as a type of contemporary tomb, a display case unto itself that will work with the purity of the sculptures somehow. It also strikes me as a space you navigate differently in its passage-like layout, with the lower ceiling creating a concentration towards the works, most of which are floor-based. I always install shows in an austere fashion in which the economy of pieces or more specifically, the space between works, itself becomes a medium. I am conscious within my practice of creating this archive of works to draw from different contexts/shows, and while they are indexes with broader references, the sculptures often reference other works within this archive – an ongoing circulation, if you like.

**In terms of motifs, you also resort to presentation types of the European art tradition, with the frequent use of vanitas symbols, which are concerned with the transitory quality of being and time just like skeleton and skull are the classical Memento Mori-images of art history.**

Things inevitably get back here, and it's a question I always have a hard time answering. This is because death implies a darkness or finality, and I see the works as possessing more flexible properties than that. When something ends, it becomes sculpture, a commemoration of a prior life or energy, fixing it against a perishing time. There is both a sustained time period within the narrative of my sculptures and the sustained time period through how they're produced as carvings in the studio. It seems time is still the main thing looming over the works.

The skull is this tactile full stop, the most universal of death's symbols, yet it walks and talks in every historic incarnation, from the dance of death to The Grateful Dead illustrations. I've made skulls as a way to imply the premature death of previous sculptures. Other times I've carved skeletons/bones and there's activity or 'circulation' occurring. I've looked for skulls in other objects also, a skull-sized conch shell and a cycling helmet, which both projects and resembles the skull. There's empathy in death and to monuments specifically, that I'm trying to reach, something beautiful beyond decay, within a structure both poetic and formal. The contradiction within the Memento Mori tradition interests me. Because, whilst the context is to admonish the vanity within the material and earthly

belongings, it's illustrated so lavishly and to such obsessive detail as if to celebrate both the subject and the skill involved in its creative representation.

**Some of your sculptures in wood are Dutch still life paintings translated into the third dimension. Killing Time depicts the classical image of the lemon that has been peeled and is hanging over the edge of the table, with fish and lobster next to it. In Australia the European art tradition is not as immediate as it is here. How did this reference develop with you? Did you have specific Dutch paintings in mind?**

The reference to the Dutch still life tradition came out of just seeing those paintings in a larger number when travelling in Holland. They had a hold on me, firstly because of the fidelity and their detail and also this silence looming in every composition. The Killing Time piece and the Salad Days are cover versions within my practice, literally attempts to specifically reference the still life tradition with certain arrangements and motifs. I was thinking, what subjects could constitute my own still life arrangement, so I created this sculptural inventory of all the animals fallen and found from my youth. It's interesting that you're referring to the falling lemon rind, because it's an image that I've used in a recently completed work for this show. It's one element of a group of carvings collectively titled, History of Holding. Negotiating sculpture is about what reference you hold onto and what you let go. This sculpture is based on a plaster cast of my hand clutching/presenting the peeling lemon, which becomes this natural bracelet winding around my wrist. I acquired these boxwood logs which resemble giant bones or preserved limbs, and in the finished work, part of the log is left exposed to become a natural plinth for the object. It's always strange to describe a sculpture, because the work itself does something both formal and unpredictable when you see it in person.

**The Baroque idea can also be detected in your work in the fact that you achieve moments of tension with certain light effects, stage elements really, which are used to intensify the illusionist aspect on an emotional level. But you don't paint your works, so that the surface structure opposes their naturalism. How does the concept of the simulacrum relate to that?**

The structure of the works (in some instances the seams of the laminated blocks are visible, for example) seems like a natural trace of production, a subtle interruption to the continuous illusion of the surface. The lighting of the work is really important to me, because it kind of awakens the rendering and surface to enhance both the form and the carving process itself. They can be too dead without specific lighting, too homogenised into their surroundings. I've never thought about my sculptures as illusionist or 'hyper realistic'. It has a lot to do with translation, even transcription, of motifs, more recently into an almost diagrammatic form, but there's a tactility there that separates them from a casting or digital rendering. It's this very inconsistency with the hyper real that I'm into, the decisions and abbreviations enacted during the making. In terms of simulacrum, I think, the sculptures do become this new thing, true only to themselves. For an artwork to succeed, I think it needs to overtake its reference. Often in the work there's this combination of two elements and the pairing creates this third new singular form through accommodation and adaptation. Something happens and the wood as a medium plays a part in that. Art should operate on an emotional level; it's an under-rated quality, but something I work towards. It's ambitious or maybe ridiculous, but I'd like the sculptures to haunt you like a great song.

**Your success as an artist followed a path through the USA. Is that the usual course of an Australian artist's career? How does one establish oneself, on the international art market as an Australian artist?**

I'm sure there is not a usual course of an Australian artist's career internationally. It's frustrating that Australia is isolated geographically, because I think it's a hurdle in terms of work affecting an audience outside of its immediate one. I feel fortunate for having interesting contexts and

opportunities, and for having had supportive people behind the work from an early point, which has enabled me to exhibit the work here and in Europe, Japan, etc.

**You work on your objects for a very long time: the production process often takes months. In the past five years your career has almost sky-rrocketed; you have been described as a Wunderkind of the Australian art scene and most of your works sell very quickly. How do you deal, as an artist, with the need to work extremely long and to simultaneously satisfy the demand of the market? Or the need for exhibition pieces, for that matter – for Vienna you started to work more than half a year in advance.**

My main objective is to make work that hopefully sustains itself soundly beyond any market curiosity. I've returned to working by myself in the studio. Feeling my need to maintain an intimacy within the work is more important long term than making more pieces available. As to how I deal with it, I'm not sure, it certainly isn't always great fun, but it's always engaging in the studio, "weak obstacles impoverish us". I think things take the time they need to take. You know, I have a quote on my wall from DJ Shadow that says "I need to explore my passions on my own schedule", and whilst there's music that moves me more, I think the sentiment is admirable here. Again I've been lucky to work with galleries who see a quality in the work specifically because of its production values and how this relates conceptually to my project.

**In addition to your sculptures you also devote yourself to watercolours. These tend to be rather small, very fine and atmospheric presentations, often portraits. Here again, an academic technique can be seen. The title of one of your series makes me prick up my ears: The Hangman's Beautiful Portraits. You seem, once more, to manipulate the viewer, setting a visual trap that plays with a certain expectation on the part of the recipient.**

The watercolours are important in that they are a respite from the duration of making a sculpture. They are much looser. I like the term 'atmospheric presentations' as a way to describe them, because I see paint as this malleable medium. They dream of becoming paintings, but remain moored to the paper surface. I studied drawing as my major in art school and I see it as a nucleus for everything else. The drawings often form pairs or a larger group to become a set of related images, a family of sorts. They are sourced from existing images or 'cover versions' of existing paintings. In terms of The Hangman's Beautiful Portraits, they are isolated faces from The Incredible String Band's record sleeve titled The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter, their sombre faces amplified to a faded Fragonard palette. I want to incorporate the drawings in exhibitions alongside the sculpture more and that's the plan for Vienna also. The exchange they have with the wooden sculptures and now also the bronze works create a more representative view of my artistic process.

**Your titles are often poetic and metaphoric. Does poetry have a special status for you, personally, and also in relation to your artistic work?**

I think I'm always aware of maintaining a level of poetry or suggestions in the works. There's a contemplative nature to how they're made and, hopefully, received, that is important, which is why it's hard to talk about individual works specifically, because sometimes defining too much dilutes any poetic interpretations. Duchamp's line about titles being the artworks 'invisible colors' is perfect, because I think in assigning a title you have this opportunity to extend the work. I have a wall cluttered with title suggestions, song titles and lines I hear from the radio; studio notes become titles later, and sometimes words give rise to a new sculpture.

**In your upcoming exhibition in Vienna, there will be beautiful examples of your sculptures which reveal in a very characteristic, but also in a very particular way, the essential elements and iconography of your work that we have been discussing – Younger than Yesterday, for example, or The Bricoleur. Similarly to other pieces, they appear like**

**'leftovers' from a complex narrative or traces of living creatures that vanished, indicating that 'someone has been there'. What is the story behind that?**

I do think of the sculptures as traces, or physical clues lay out and positioned purposefully. I've always been interested and inspired by narrative, in song and story, where description resonates with more emotive possibilities. And damaged goods make for a good description, I'm thinking of how Scott Walker can croon a room into existence. I try to leave these narrative possibilities open, in an attempt to multiply an object's usual reading or function. The 'someone' is naturally me and at time the sculptures have started from stubborn memories or associations to different forms. Barnacles, for example, return in various works, and they have always interested me. In attaching to an object they redefine it as a plinth/support structure, a dormant form to be dated by their growth. Sculpture is essentially remains – a domestic archaeology. I always feel with the carvings I'm digging/removing information in order to fabricate new information. I mention this because this information is so fixed, as if to appear fused or preserved by time, which is another important part of their story. At times, I guess, I've wanted it to feel like the water level has dropped in the gallery and the sculptures have been revealed, their compositions produced by both natural and unnatural acts.

***Jennifer Higgle-The Past Sure is Tense* (Ricky Swallow-This Time Another Year, June 2005)**

**'The past sure is tense. The past sure is now.'**

Captain Beefheart<sup>1</sup>

'There was a fox stuck in the roots of a Cyprus tree; we made a fire. We had slug guns in the house and took shots at the magpies; a bird nested in the roller doors of the garage and we found a blue tongue lizard dead in the sand dunes; the skink was the failed pet that always dies. There are photos of my brother and father preparing to go duck hunting but I don't remember them bringing anything home.' <sup>2</sup>

A study in counterpoint: land and air. Animals and birds snap frozen in wood, their fidelity to appearance their most unreal aspect. Guilt mingles with recall as it wanders through the corridors of old museums and teenage bedrooms. It doesn't matter how old an object is, or how long ago you did that thing you wish you hadn't: every time you look at it or think about it it's resurrected. Images can function like an inventory or the settling of debt; a scrutiny of the past the artist experiences in the present in order to fully understand it.

Like a group of dead orphans these animals and birds are not aware of the circumstances of their demise; they seem less lifeless than sleepy. Two lizards, two rats, a duck, some mice; a magpie like an Antipodean pheasant with a humble sparrow nestled in its chest; the tough clean lines of a fox skull; an isolated swallow (the name-sake).

The *Losing End* (2005) is a wooden relief; a tondo time capsule of vivid neglect comprising dead birds and animals. Death does not always mean disappearance; here, despite the elegiac atmosphere, there is a faint hum of something urgent and alive (the dance of death). Objects carved with care make you look slow down and look hard. Such precision creates a clarity seemingly unobstructed by gesture or effort; but explanation is another matter. The most familiar things can be unfathomable.

Swallow makes sculptures that replicate reality to an unreal degree. The personal is filtered through the formal; the imagination through precedent. A dead rabbit echoes a painting by Jan Fyt or Jan Baptist Weenix; a duck tumbles like a detail from a carving by Grindling Gibbons. Every surface bears the imprint of experience both touched and imagined (a sculpture is one kind of energy stopped in its tracks to create another – in this case, a transformed tree). Sometimes the act of revelation can be almost supernatural (it is all this, and more). It can be useful to resurrect ghosts to help you navigate the past, but it's important to remember that some are younger than others (skulls are as familiar to skateboards as they are to 17th century painting and carving. Swallow says the skulls on the Powell Peralta skateboard decks are 'among the most stubborn images in my subliminal source book'<sup>3</sup>.) Sometimes an image grows from stories so quiet or distant they're hard to hear (what happened when you were young); sometimes from a choked syllable or a sentence shouted into distortion (you're getting older); someone humming or struggling to remember something that plagues them; perhaps something or someone they miss. A line from a song you can't get out of your head.

*Killing Time* (2003): a life-size wooden sculpture of the fish and crustaceans Swallow remembers his family catching when he was a child, arranged across the kitchen table from his childhood. Lemon peel, a knife and a lone fish teeter precariously and permanently on the edge. What took hours to hunt and years to remember took months to carve. Each memory has been scrutinized and replicated; a debt paid in time. It's a sculpture evolved from worn-out spaces (both the ones you touch and the ones worn thin with recollection); one that engages with a history seen only in images made by other artists (Dutch 17th and early Australian marine painting and carving); and one Swallow was an eyewitness to – his own history, growing up by the sea.

A still life is always more than the sum of its parts (its past?); a reiteration that someone who was here once has gone away and that big histories intertwine with the ones only you know about. The dead and inanimate are dependent on the living to animate them. (In Rome, the catacombs of the Capucine cemetery are decorated with delicate arrangements of bones. Signs on the walls declare 'What you are we were. What we are you will be'.) Objects and skin fuel memories; what is left when someone goes? What do they leave behind? *Come Together* (2002) is a wooden skull buried in the folds of a wooden beanbag that looks soft enough to collapse in. It's strange and sad and ordinary (everybody has a skull yet they can be the stuff of nightmares) – the domestic married to the eternal; household failure and small deaths (love leaves); the ballad of a rented home; an offering up, the end of a relationship, the road, a life.

Everyone dies; but before that happens they need somewhere to rest.

Dust settles; people disappear but leave pieces of themselves; you find it hard to touch what they have touched. Isolation is familiar to a still life: a slice of bread slips to the side; a knife hovers at the edge of the picture plane; an empty cup, an abandoned meal, a slumped hare; someone has always just left the room. But often it's an isolation which seems more peaceful than an exile should be; as if solitude might have something to recommend it.

In *The Arrangement* (2005) two snakes support a bicycle helmet modelled on one that Swallow wore when he first moved to London. (Structures for heads recur again and again: hoods, hats, skulls.) The carving of the pale, soft wood is exquisitely hypersensitive to differences in texture: the tiny wrinkle on a snake's mouth and the dull sheen of a reptilian scale; a miniscule dint in a battered helmet. It's absurdly life-like, as ghostly as an accurate hallucination. Recollection and invention intermingle, slowly carved in an attempt to retrieve or replicate, to mourn or to fling into the future what has been lost and what might yet be discovered through the simple expedient of observation.

There is a clear implication here: heads (the imagination, the mind) are fragile and life often tenuous (cycling in a big city is like navigating a dangerous digestive system). The everyday is wrapped in the symbolic: danger and protection become interchangeable. The indifferent snakes do not recognise borders; they inhabit their space with the delicate sinew of Baroque ribbons, animated at the promise of something we have no access to. The sculpture alludes to more than its materials; it resonates with holes, temptation, poison; it's a cock sculpture, a Joni Mitchell song, the eels in a horse's skull in the *Tin Drum* that prefigure a descent into madness; an urban fall from grace. It makes clear that objects and animals are rarely one thing: our imagination spins them into many meanings, and weaves what we need from them. *The Arrangement* appears to be moving, as though replete with a life in the process of transformation; the eyes of the snake dart about: vision itself is an anxious object. It makes clear that the skull is something that needs careful tending: it can be worn down or broken; it's pitted against time.

The shape and size of some ideas can be felt more acutely than measured; sometimes, however, a feeling can be so acute it's almost tangible. *The Exact Dimensions of Staying Behind* (2005): a life-size vanitas, a seated skeleton, its skull uplifted like a death's head in the sun; immobile ecstasy, a hooded top that cushions a fragile shoulder. The bones of a hand clutch a staff like a microphone, the elongated bow of an instrument, a cross (objects of solace and expression). Each element is inseparable: drapery and structure relate not only to the rungs of the chair but to the memory of other sculptures; like an old man dreaming of his earlier manifestations or struggling to remember a melody that touched him once. (Details, like memories, are fragile, even when they were laboriously hewn; everything reminds everyone of bodies; once released does the singer's voice remain part of the body in air?). The body, like the still-life, is reduced to its constituent parts; the bones of experience, waiting for the flesh of the imagination to finish it. The vanitas declares nothing is permanent – except for this image of impermanence; something static that alludes to the passage of time; an image of death that prompts a re-examining of life; ordinary objects and scenes that make us look at the overlooked.

What happens then is anyone's guess. Time is all.

1. Ricky Swallow mentioned to me that 'The Past Sure is Tense' by Captain Beefheart is the best song title ever.
2. Author in conversation with Ricky Swallow, London, January 2005
3. Ricky Swallow: Field Recordings, Justin Paton, Craftsman House, Thames and Hudson (Australia) Fishermens Bend, p. 68.
4. Ibid. p. 50

***Lesley Vance talks to Ricky Swallow* (North Drive Press-Issue 2, June 2005)**

**Lesley Vance talks to Ricky Swallow about Art, Neil Young, and Dolphins with Expensive Jumpers**

**Los Angeles.**

**February 22, 2005 in Los Angeles, CA**

LESLEY VANCE: I'm always interested when artists make big changes in their work, so I wanted to start by talking about that. Maybe, to focus the question, we could talk about subject matter, because I would say in your older work you were monumentalizing objects that were about to become extinct—the Game Boy with barnacles, the colored plastic Apple-computer skulls, the encased PowerBook, etc. These were objects that were only being used on Earth for a short window of time. Around 2001, wood replaced plastics and the subject matter shifted to objects or creatures that exist in the present time; for example, hats, fish, a helmet, a cactus, snakes. These things have been around for hundreds of years, thousands of years, millions of years backwards in time; they exist in the present and they will exist into the future. Whereas a Game Boy was in the culture for a few years and then became obsolete—it was a dead object when you made a sculpture of it.

RICKY SWALLOW: The earlier work was about trying to fix things against time, and it still is. The first of those obsolete models I made was a tape deck, which was this Toshiba tape-deck/boom-box my family always had in the house. And I took it and used it in my studio. I can't remember what made me want to remake it, but as soon as I finished it, the real thing was stolen from me. All that work with the technology stuff and video games . . . the reasons I chose those objects were somehow different from how those objects were read . . . but at some point I felt like I didn't want to be the "pop kid" anymore.

LV: Does this have something to do with getting older, having more life experiences, changes in the kind of music you were listening to. . . . It does feel like the work has grown with you.

RS: There were a lot of exhibitions at that point with turntables, video games, tabletop, arcade records . . . but to me all those things were the first objects that you could spend time with yourself. I remember using those and having them be my thing. They're almost like the first sort of studio one has, the first place that's your own where you can conquer and understand things without needing someone else there. And that was important. Where I grew up, in this small coastal town in Australia called San Remo, there were far fewer of those things than if you grew up in a city. They take longer to get to the coasts of Australia. So when I started making those computer games, it was a statement about what things meant to me at the time, and I was a bit naïve about how those would be read. It's not a celebration of the 80s.

LV: So it was more about what the objects meant to you, not what they meant to the culture or their obsolescence.

RS: It's like painter's radios, because the way that they survive is by becoming stereos for people who work in a trade where it doesn't matter what happens to them [the stereos] physically. So everyone has . . . there are a lot of dads who have those things.

LV: Mine has one in the basement tool area that I can never forget. It's got to be several decades old and I'm sure it will live with the tools forever.

RS: They don't go to heaven, they just go to the garage. And I was interested in museums and museum displays when there's some sort of compression or understanding of a timeline, and I tried to translate this interest by removing all the color and the function, and making the Game Boy, computer, etc., almost these tombs that are just the shapes of themselves. It's like those coffins in Africa that get made in the shape of the person's profession, like if you're a carpenter you get a big

giant saw, if you're an athlete you get a sneaker or something like that. I felt like they [the objects] entomb themselves. I can't explain quite why, but it was important that they were empty and there was nothing inside them other than their design, so they're remembered for their design. And back then I was interested in being an "artist of your time," and I was interested in being a young artist, and what that meant. And it got to the point where I just wanted the work to be more like songs, or more like albums I like. The work I was making then couldn't have been more different than the kind of things I was into.

LV: You mean what you were into in a cultural, artistic sense: music, other art . . . ?

RS: Yeah, I was making computer games out of cardboard, but I wasn't listening to Kraftwerk necessarily. I had been into electronic music, but. . . . Somehow different major phases in the music I'm listening to definitely change works. I think, with the wood. . . . I don't know how to say this, but it got to the point where I wanted to make warmer artworks. And I didn't really know how to do that. And the last things I made before I started making the wooden sculptures, the last kind of cold still lifes, were those iMac computer things. And so much of it was outsourced to other people . . . I made the prototypes and then got a company to make them. But there's a big protestant work ethic with me. I had the feeling I wasn't being a proper artist anymore in terms of my own strict definitions of what that means, and I felt like I had to prove something to myself in the studio, so I just started making that bird. You know the story, right?

LV: Yes, but I want to hear it again. When you lectured at Cal Arts this story had everyone talking the next day.. Everyone said in disbelief, "He taught himself how to sculpt like that from a craft-store book about how to sculpt birds out of wood?!"

RS: How to Carve Realistic Birds by David Tippery? Yeah, I don't know, I can't remember how I found that book. It had all these carvings of birds on the cover, and they were in different stages. And it just reminded me of my own work, in that they were like dupes or something, but they weren't rendered, they were blank; so I bought it, and that was one of the only times when I didn't know what I was going to do next. I got that book and I just started making the bird, and it was fueled by this curiosity to see if I could actually do it realistically. I was following it step-by-step in the book, and it was before I had many chisels in my life, so I was using Dremels and things.

And then I was in Belgium, and I saw round medallion carvings by a Dutch carver who, at one point, was the assistant to this guy Grindling Gibbons, and they were called "Earth, Wind, Fire, Water" or something—the four elements. One of them had a skull and a sword, and it was the first thing I saw that made me feel like I could make more than the bird. The bird could be with other things. The thing with a still life is that way detail can amplify the ordinary and allow a more extreme narrative.

Then I went home and the bird was the only thing in my studio. I had all these plywood tables that I make when I'm anxious about not making anything. I just had three tables and a bird. The bird seemed like it needed a home that was smaller than the big room it was in. Things that I've made are often things that I'm capable of wearing out, so my studio sneaker ended up being carved out as the home for the bird. If I were to carve that piece now it would be one solid piece, because that's important.

There's often a time loop that occurs with my work, so that the shoe has a relationship to the Vacated Campers sculpture of my studio shoes I had made years earlier. That's kind of the humble beginning of the woodcarving story. It was at a time when I was going through a separation, and it seemed important to create a fixed relationship between the bird and the shoe. I guess I just allowed myself to be more present in the finished things, to allow myself to be readily available in the work, like a host . . .

LV: Like you are built into the object . . . it's a more emotional object . . .

RS: It's like I've made something occur rather than remembering how everything used to occur. I

think I need another question to hone in my focus . . . .

LV: Well, we're talking about why the shoe contains the bird. . . . Your work makes me feel conscious that our bodies are on our skeletons; that we're these walking containers. And so . . . we rely on the abstractions of language to function in the world. I've been reading about how our brains perceive things we encounter as spatial metaphors, and this happens subconsciously, but it seems to me that language collides with the sense we have of ourselves as physical bodies.

I'm noticing that in all of your recent work, one thing contains another. Two disparate objects are brought together, and in the union there is this poetic resonance. . . . The fish in the tire, the skull in your hooded sweatshirt, the bird in the shoe, the snake in the helmet, the cactus in the pot . . . it seems like you're creating new metaphors to describe the world around you.

RS: I'd never thought of the cactus in the pot.

LV: Actually, I first think of the water in the cactus.

RS: Yeah.

LV: Although with the other works something literally contains another thing, and it's about shelter and vulnerability, but with the cactus that vulnerability is there because the cactus surface is like skin, and there's graffiti carved all over it.

RS: I guess that sort of attitude about a coupling of things . . . it was kind of evident in the work before the carving. It's this weird nurturing thing. But I'm sure it has something to do with my home changing so much. Like moving here from Australia, moving to L.A., moving to London. . . . By home I mean a city, a house, circles of friendships, your creative, nurturing forces . . . I have these three different locations. I think it's unsettling for me.

Somehow in the work I try to settle that movement. There's so much codependence in the pieces that they don't need an environment—like the skull in the beanbag. Someone else pointed out that for the skull to be pushed so far into the beanbag implies an impact. I guess, for me, I wanted the skull to be so far in there that you couldn't imagine the beanbag without it. It's not my sculpture of a pregnant woman, but I had the skull in the studio and I had the beanbag, and I was about to move from one city to another, and so there's something about me being in a transitory space and the beanbag being a malleable piece of furniture. It's like a nomadic kind of couch.

LV: Does this have something to do with how everything has a low center of gravity?

RS: I can't imagine sculptures that aren't on the floor.

LV: But I mean in terms of situating you in a place, which becomes like a home? They don't have implied movement; the movement is self-contained in the piece.

RS: There's a certain domesticity to it. But how could a beanbag be anywhere other than the floor.

LV: True.

RS: I think of it as a domestic heart. Not an emotional heart, but as an organ . . . a furniture heart. And I guess it's this thing that has a center and the center is the skull, but all the piping in the beanbag trails back to that recess where the skull is. To me, I think of it as some kind of weird circulation system, so without the skull the organ wouldn't be able to complete the function. As if it's not something you could sit in anymore. I think if we keep talking we can get to the bottom of this pairing thing.

LV: To me it's like your work is creating a new language with metaphors . . . because language is slippery, and it fails so often when you need to describe the emotion within memories or objects or people. . . . So you have to put these two strange things together and then something happens that describes these complexities to you.

RS: I think writers can do that. Like when you read a book and you're suddenly in that place. I get so disappointed with self-referential art—art that is just about other art.

LV: I'm not saying writers can't do it. . . . I just think it's difficult for me, and I think others, to express a depth of emotion within ideas using words . . . It's frustrating.

RS: Maybe that's what's different about the wood pieces that I don't think is apparent in some of the other works. The other works are like . . . if I was being really cruel to myself I was like a kid being clever. I wanted things to warm up, for the work to have a lasting impact on people. Part of that relies on the intricacy of their making, and the performative aspect of their making.

Say the fish in the tire [Private Dancer]; One thing that came to my mind while I was making it was a J. G. Ballard short story. Everyone is leaving Earth to go somewhere, maybe Mars—I can't remember. A scientist finds what may be the last fish on earth in a puddle, and so he goes and gets another scientist to show him, and the fish is flapping around, and they try to figure out how to capture it and get it to survive so that fish can start up again, and then they go away and these kids come with rocks and they throw rocks at the fish and kill it, until the fish is one with the pond. Only through a limited environment was it able to maintain itself. But I also liked the idea that if it could only do one thing, that one thing was enough—like it could only go around in circles, and it's against all these walls, so no one could ever find it there.

LV: I have this habit of projecting myself into work that I look at, so when I look at that piece I feel like I'm the fish. Maybe there is water in the tire now, but it will evaporate, and so the fish becomes vulnerable.

RS: There's definitely a sort of empathy in the work that I want to be there.

LV: Yes.

RS: In my favorite still lifes the animals aren't dead things that have had all their life removed through a hunting process. This is something that I thought about recently, because I was just at the Met in New York—kind of on the rap of a friend in London. She wrote a piece about Chardin and told me I had to look at them closer. . . . There's one at the Met that's of these rabbits, and more than looking like dead creatures, they look like people who have had a hard day at work and have just come home exhausted. They are slumped over each other and they look helpless, but they don't look "over." I think Eric Swenson does this really well. There is a way you feel for the animals, a way you can't help but think you've been there before too.

LV: We could just slide into talking about evolution from there.

RS: I think it's too easy to forget that we are just other animals.

LV: We're very narcissistic animals.

RS: People are surprised when they find out other animals in the kingdom express loyalty, for example. We're just dolphins with expensive jumpers.

LV: I'm reading a Harvard professor's book about the opposing viewpoints between Freud and C.S. Lewis relating to the existence of God.

RS: Freud and Lewis in the ring together!

LV: Freud is the atheist and Lewis is the atheist-turned-believer. I'm nearly finished, and the central theme seems to be that Freud spent his life as a non-believer depressed, without many close friends, sometimes addicted to cocaine, etc., while Lewis became a believer and suddenly felt complete, settled, contented. And I am thinking, am I destined for misery? One significant factor in Lewis's turn has to do with thinking about the empathy humans feel for one another, our 'moral fiber.' And I'm listening to this audio book in my studio thinking, "What? Animals who are not 'we' also exhibit these traits." But maybe they didn't observe this at that time.

RS: I don't know why, all of a sudden, the use of animals became almost consistent in the practice . . . I don't even like animal art!

LV: Well, we all come from the same thing. . . . We've been fish, we've been monkeys. I read somewhere that they think at one point in our evolution we almost became extinct.

RS: Even when I was in art school I was reading Darwin, and there was this thing about evolution in the work that was always discussed, and now it never really comes up.

LV: That's one of the major things I think about when I see Killing Time, with the dead fish on the table.

RS: I think that piece is quite religious. There's something in my attitude about endless guilt. There's some moralistic thing there I guess. Some of the first pictures I saw repeatedly were images from the Catholic Church. I went to a Catholic primary school for half of my early education. My grandmother had a lot of images of saints around, and a giant tapestry of The Last Supper. I wouldn't say I'm a religious person now, but that sort of imagery is as much a part of my stubborn vocabulary of images as, say, Powell Peralta.

LV: Does that have more to do with your family or personal history than with religious belief?

RS: No. I think that . . . when I made that Scream mask, people thought it was a religious sculpture. Right now I'm making a piece for Venice that is a seated skeleton in a very basic wooden chair, and, accidentally, it's probably originally from a church because it has a space in the back for where you might put your hymn book. The skeleton is sitting holding a staff, and I was thinking about the Zurbarán painting of St. Francis in ecstasy, and also the Caravaggio version—the skull somehow looks like the pose of a saint in that it's got the staff. It's looking up for some kind of salvation, and the hand that's resting on the chair is holding a whittling knife, and the staff is half carved out with this whittling trick. . . . So the skeleton is depicted as though it has carved the staff out of boredom, or out of a way to further mark its time post-flesh. Because the whole thing is wooden, it raises the question of whether it has carved its entire self out of something.

But I think of it less in a religious sense, and more in terms of this confidence saints have in their solitary nature. They are sometimes depicted performing miracles, but, more often than not, they are depicted in very tightly-cropped panels by themselves, or carved as these very vertical German carvings, where they're on these tiny little rock bases. It's like they are human islands. There's definitely something about how independent they are.

LV: So this is you in your studio.

RS: And in that piece the only thing that separates it from being a sculpture that's 400 years old is the hooded top that's draped over the chair, so it's the same hooded top from my earlier self-portrait. In some way that skull was supposed to date that self-portrait. This new piece is definitely not a self-portrait, but the hooded top definitely connects it to now, and to other pieces I've done. I guess

the hooded top is a contemporary monk's habit.

LV: So is that why you've put the Adidas logo on the piece with the hooded sweatshirt over the skeleton head? Or the decal on the sculpture of the glove?

RS: The shoe also has a logo. With the Adidas hat, it was just the hat I had at the time. But I'd seen these disturbing but amazing photos of hikers in the snow who had perished, and their jackets—and in some circumstances their beanies—were still on. They were like skeletons wearing extreme sportswear gear. And it wasn't so much this consumer idea that the brand outlives the person, but the idea that a dead thing could occupy something that could still be functional . . . that death is kept warm.

LV: This is something else about all your work when one thing contains another. There is usually a non-living thing containing a living thing—even if it's the piece with the chain in the hat. (Am I stretching it there?) Maybe this has something to do with how we occupy space.

RS: I guess that's why the chain trails out like some kind of weird spine. I still don't know why there's that need.

LV: I think we are figuring it out. I do feel like empathy is important in your work, and that's my first response. If you think about what empathy is and how it occurs as a feeling . . . you need to have more than one thing, since it's about relating to someone or something outside of yourself.

RS: It's overly romantic, but there is some kind of emotional struggle to make anything in the studio work. If I think something is really moving, I want everyone that's close to me to have experienced the same thing—like if I went to a concert I really like, or when I saw the film Nashville. So, just this idea that there is the ability to move people . . . I feel like it used to happen with art a lot more before art had to compete with a lot of other things. When art was the movies and television. . . . I think music sticks, and I don't think artworks stick in the same way. Having every Neil Young album is kind of like having access to a whole series of narratives that you're not involved in, but you can somehow get involved in through the music. Studio soundtrack is a very long question. It's something about a lasting impression and the sculptures are supposed to be a lasting impression of something else.

LV: I can see you and your work hanging out with a Neil Young song.

RS: Good idea.

LV: I was talking yesterday about how Neil Young can weave his own personal narrative into a song and it's okay. Like on Silver & Gold, he can sing about being in a band called Buffalo Springfield a long time ago, and there is still this emotional significance that expands away from him, even though the song lyrics are so specific to his life.

RS: Yeah, but if you read a Neil Young song printed, I don't think it'd translate. . . . In Shakey, all his quotes . . . when I first started reading them, there was this disappointment, because initially he doesn't appear to say anything that's a revelation. I don't think he's someone who's really into art . . . he's a really straight-up guy. He's into cars. How many of our friends are into cars? It's all in the delivery, medium, whatever.

LV: Yes, but it's when he throws in these little anecdotes, or mentions his son or his wife or Laurel Canyon in a song . . . with the delivery. It feels like real life somehow.

RS: I was at a friend's place the other night and we were arguing about which Neil Young song to put

on, and I wanted to put on “On the Beach” and this guy, Manfox, was like, “Oh man, don’t put on any of this wah-wah Eric Clapton shit.” He was basically saying the album was rubbish. But he is into music . . . he’s not a hater. He just didn’t like that record. And I was listening to it and I never realized that there are bongos.

LV: Really?

RS: Play it back. There are bongos. And this guy was trying to say it was tacky. It was elevator music. And without the words maybe it is.

LV: I want to talk about the nature of wood, the material.

RS: One of the embarrassing things I have to tell people when they ask me what I do is that I’m a wood-carver. And then there is this question: How can I tell people I carve things out of wood without them thinking I should be arrested? It’s the stuff of wizards and unicorns. I’m talking about traditional wood carving versus what I do. I’m proud of how traditional it is and how handmade it is, and one of the things I think is important is that one goes to the studio and actually makes things. But, to be a wood-carver is sort of returning to something old. And since I haven’t been using plastics and sanding, I feel like it’s almost a more wholesome studio.

I guess it’s also an acoustic material. It’s a living material—like it still moves when it’s taken off the tree. Although you try to plan for as little movement as possible, it still has the ability to expand or shrink. When I chose that wood I was looking for another material that was as mute as the cardboard or the white PVC—something that doesn’t have a purpose. Like the only purpose it has is its subject. It’s about description and abbreviation. But if the material itself is abbreviated then it’s kind of invisible. It’s one of the most unwooden woods you can find.

LV: But it’s still wood. It’s a lot like flesh.

RS: It’s a very bodily material. That wood is traditionally used for pattern making, and conceptually it interested me that its major use was to show people what a thing could look like—to suggest an idea rather than to structurally improve somebody’s house. It literally has this function that it’s not quite at a “real world” level of finish. It’s the material of a proposal.

You know, regarding empathy, I don’t think these things would have the same effect if they weren’t done in wood. I think the kind of material you use definitely affects what you make in that subject. It just causes you to look at things in a different way. Things appear to me now that I want to carve. They appeal to me both because I’m conceptually interested in what they could do with something else, but also because I wonder how they would be, or how much stranger they would get if they were sculpted in wood. In more of the recent things, like, say, the table, there’s one large slab of wood representing twenty different kinds of materials to unify the description into one experience. There’s not the distraction of details in terms of surface renderings. And I hope that’s what makes the experience of them more intimate, because you’re in the “beige zone.”

LV: And everything is life-size. It’s like an alternate reality, or parallel universe. Something else I wanted to know is, I have these paintings that I associate with what I was listening to at the time I was painting them, or what was happening in the news, what I heard on NPR when I was working on them. Does this happen to you?

RS: That happens to me, yeah. When people ask me what my influences are, I can think of music more quickly than I can think of art, but in fear of the next question being, “and how is that blah blah blah . . .” There’s not some song or album associated with a piece, but there are blocks of music. And so there is some music that I can’t listen to . . . in the same way some music draws forth past people or past homes. . . . And it’s almost like to channel those people again is not something I’m interested in.

But when I first moved to L.A.—I don't live here anymore—that was the beginning of the [John] Fahey years, and I think of the Amoeba “Fahey” files as the soundtrack to a lot of things. Even the first [Devendra] Banhart record is the soundtrack to the making of the cactus piece. And it's also what people have given me. Shakey is my “biennale book,” and subsequently my whole biennale soundtrack, in a way. I have to choose images for the appendix for this book, and there will definitely be an image of Neil Young in there.

In the studio I feel like having to have assistants is necessary in certain places and for ambitious pieces, but ultimately being in my studio by myself is mostly what I do or crave. When you're in the studio having music or having a choice . . . it's like that sort of attitude . . . it's the privilege of company without the complication or distraction of people. It's a way to socialize with information. And the information is as important culturally as any art.

LV: And this all has to do with the condensed living time that your sculptures contain when they are finished . . . it's the hours you spent with it in the studio that are present, and also the music you were listening to and the events going on around you. . . . We should talk a little bit about time in your work.

RS: I'm someone who thinks about, “Okay, it's mid-February. What was I doing a year ago or what have I done in the year since last February?” I'm in L.A. now, and I was here five months ago. What have I achieved in terms of productivity in the time since visits here? I keep studio logbooks of hours, even though I don't pay myself an hourly rate. And now I'm just as particular about these books as I am about these pens that I got in Japan. And it's because it's there to remind me. . . . It's interesting to answer the dumbest question in the world, like: “How long did it take you to make this sculpture?” And I can say “464,000 hours.”

But it's also that at the end of the day I need to see the number “12” at the end of the page, and if it's not there I feel like I've ripped off the project. I am kind of nerdy about that. My dad talks about having a fishing logbook, and he questions the legitimacy of my birth date, because according to his fishing log, he had to fly back from Tasmania because mom was in labor with me. I was born a day early or a day late of my actual birth date. So he thinks it was just a mistake on the birth certificate that got turned into my birth date. But . . . anyway . . . this piece [points to cactus in catalogue] is the biggest thing I've worked on completely independently, which may be one of the reasons I'm attracted to it. But . . . you know how you were going to ask me that question, ‘If you were in L.A. . . .?’”

LV: If you were more pleased with the work you were making when you lived in L.A. versus when you moved to London, would you move back to L.A.? [laughs]

RS: And I say, “I love L.A. I'd move back here in a second.”

LV: Well, you know that snake in the helmet? Hmmm . . . it's fine but it's just not like that cactus piece. . . . [laughs] Geography is pretty important with that cactus piece. That's a very “Highland Park” cactus.

RS: The kind of affection I feel for this environment could never be reciprocated in London, because London isn't an environment, it's a city, and it doesn't feel like it has ever been a landscape, whereas L.A. feels like it's only recently, and not even totally successfully, been turned into a city. The kind of nature is so persistent, you know, it dangles from freeways and grows through tennis fences and back the other way and all that sort of stuff. And when I was here [L.A.], I felt like I lived in a place, whereas now I feel like I'm part of a city.

And you can live here and be part of it without feeling the same as all the other things in the other parts. Whereas in London . . . well, I guess here a traffic jam reminds you that you are just one of a whole lot of people doing the same thing, but in London the public transport thing, and commuting—maybe in New York it's like this as well—but you are more locked into the routines of

everybody else.

I guess when I think about Highland Park, this cactus was just around the corner from Joyce and John's. It was between my house and Joyce's. And it's this kind of "boredom tree." All the graffiti on there looks kind of similar, and I don't know if it's all been scratched in there by a group of kids on the same day, or the same kid over a couple of days, but there's definitely something about it collecting information, and then it just having to listen to that information—like it didn't choose to have all that information on it, but it is what it is. The idea that the plant could represent a demographic is interesting.

LV: With this piece I'm thinking that it's the vulnerability of the plant that triggers empathy . . . the cuts and drought the plant has endured.

RS: Yeah, but the persistence of this plant for me is very L.A. Like the kind of idea that people drive around in dead cars here.

LV: Well, it's also like you don't get how gravity makes this plant possible. It's like a body with arms that are barely attached. And I remember the real cactus when you were making this, and parts of it were dead and brown . . .

RS: And it couldn't stay up.

LV: Especially with parts breaking off, when it's very bodily . . .

RS: Well, they heal . . . when we lose limbs, we're not okay.

LV: We can cut ourselves though.

RS: We can't cut . . . well, some people do carve things into themselves. I think it's a good homage to the neighborhood, how in the end the surface description is a description of what's underneath, and how a cactus grows and how it makes its cells, with all those pockets to store and circulate water. It's one of the only sculptures that has an interior from the outside. And that interior and exterior space is always quite important in the other sculptures. Even in this, in the bicycle helmet, the interior and the exterior just sort of collapse into each other through those apertures, and then those apertures are disturbed by snakes that have the ability to go through the inside and the outside. Whereas when you put a helmet on, it protects you from the outside.

LV: There's also this way that the snakes are like the human brain . . .

RS: Eeeewww!

LV: I mean, obviously there's this helmet, and it's the actual size of a helmet, so when I look at it I imagine putting it on my head, and then when I see the snake there's the immediate association of what's in my head with what's in the helmet.

RS: You'd be like Medusa on a bicycle. I guess how content the subjects are with each other is quite important to me. The helmet never touches the ground, because the snakes are underneath and lift it up. It's the first thing I've made which depicts a moving thing, like it's my baroque-dance piece. The fish and the bird, they're paused in the thing—they're not flying around or swimming. Everything's exhausted. And the snakes, not that they could move at any minute in real life, but they are depicted moving through something, and the way they pull on the straps of the helmet and the straps tie . . . it's the depiction of a living still life rather than a dead still life.