

Paul Oberst: Temples, Towers and Totems

Bridgette Mayer Gallery

Philadelphia, PA

Interview with artist Paul Oberst and Gallery Director

Bridgette Mayer

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BM: How did you decide to be an artist?

PO: I decided to be an artist after a freshman course in modern art history. I left for college wanting to major in veterinary medicine, but during admission, I was told my chance of getting into vet school was 1 in 100. That was definitely out of the question. However, as I studied the history of modern art in the fall class, it was contemporary art that knocked me out. I became completely hooked on art and knew that this was my future. The other factor was that I had been creative since childhood and loved making objects of contemplation.

BM: Where did you study?

PO: I went to college at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. The school had new art facilities and my professor, Tom Gaines, was fresh out of graduate school at the University of California, San Diego where he studied with Manny Farber, Robert Kushner, Eleanor and David Antin, and Amy Goldin among others. Tom had also gone to the School of Visual Arts in NYC where his teachers included Richard Serra, Carl Andre, Robert Mangold, William Agee, Mel Bochner, Lucy Lippard and Leon Golub. He was even in a movie with a Warhol actor. Tom is a Philly artist. He and his wife Alice also have a home in Maine. I lured them to Maine! We have stayed in close contact.

BM: Was Tom Gaines another reason you decided to be an artist?

PO: Tom Gaines was out of this world. Because he was a trained actor first and later an artist, he was able to express through his body every nuance of his creative vision. At times I would think, "How in the world will I ever understand all this information?" Then I would relax and see in Tom the beauty of art and passion and love and all the fundamental elements of art. If Tom were talking about repetition in art, his body was demonstrating repetition, as was his voice. He was brilliant. He would also make an assignment and sometimes change his mind, which drove my classmates crazy. But I thought it was a purposeful way to teach the fluidity of changing artistic ideas. Soon he made me his assistant. At that point, I was close to him and his family, and I absorbed everything from Tom like a sponge. Tom's paintings at the time were large minimal biomorphic forms on a background. The form would be taped off from the background and the color laid on in layers as fluid paint that was also splattered. The surfaces were incredibly rich, like a bed of moss. They are gorgeous paintings. I bought one when I graduated.

BM: What did your work look like during this time frame (we are talking mid 70's)?

PO: My work was sensual, but it was fundamentally conceptual. I was truly obsessed with Marcel Duchamp and contemporary conceptual artists. I did this one piece wherein I took an artist palette I found in the garbage (it was a plank of wood with loads of dried paint on it) and cut it up into 1-inch squares. I then reassembled the pieces into a flat chevron shape...like a landscape reflected in water but turned vertically. I then fabricated an 8-foot tall version of this 14-inch piece to scale. All of the impasto on the palette

piece was blown up huge. I installed each of these two components at either end of a 40-foot long gallery wall. The piece was titled "Mimesis" after the Greek study of mimicry as a fundamental component of artistic creation. By separating the two elements with so much distance, the viewer had to walk back and forth and back and forth to see if an element on the small piece was faithfully executed to scale on the larger. I had taken an advanced aesthetics philosophy course at the same time I was doing this independent study in conceptual art. I had four shows of conceptual work the spring of my senior year and prefaced each show with writings about the work. For my philosophy course, I took the prefaces apart analyzing each in terms of aesthetic studies. My paper was typed in 4 different types of ink on accounting forms with a million errors and typos corrected (this was before word processing and computers) but left in place to underscore the nature of play and chance and for visual interest and texture. I dedicated the paper to Marcel Duchamp and turned it in thinking the professor would either love it or fail me. She loved it. That taught me something about risk taking and art.

BM: As you talk about this piece, I am struck by the intensive amount of labor and physicality that went into making it and how that seems to be consistent with many of your current sculptural works. Is that part of your intention with being a sculptor?

PO: For me art is shamanic in nature. I may start a sculpture with an overall plan, but once I start working, I would have to say I become possessed. I feel the flow of paint, I smell the wood or cloth, I listen to music, and I hear the repetition of my mark making. Soon I am in a kind of trance, a meditation. Once there, I am off in the world of creation, and I am in a flow that is not unlike nature. I have always loved the Jackson Pollock interview in which he was

asked if he was indeed representing nature in his drip paintings. His response was, "I am nature." Look at nature. A storm comes in and tears everything up and rearranges everything, and then there is this great calm after the storm. The calm after the storm is me sitting in front of the work mesmerized by all the creative events that took place and my wondering how in the world it all happened.

BM: You work in a number of materials: cloth, paint, wire, wood and float freely between them. Was this always a part of your art making and how do you decide what material you will work in when beginning a work?

PO: I have crossed media from the beginning. When I was young, I used anything to construct what it was I wanted to make. As a student and then as an artist, I have always felt rebellious. If we were studying woodblock printing, I would take a piece of plywood into the shop and cut it up with the table saw, pour glue on it and when it all dried, ink it and send it through the press. The idea of sitting there carving out an image into a block of wood bored me to tears. I just wouldn't do it. For me, art is about reaching out into unknowable areas and attempting to bring back an aspect of that reach. If you reach with the same tools the same way everyone else has, then you reach into a fairly well explored area. If, however, you scramble the order of everything and then toss the map out the window, well, then you are in uncharted territory. That is very exciting to me. On the other hand, I do respect artistic traditions and like to tip my hat to any and all ideas that have come before me. For me art is about making new propositions all the time...extending our reach to enhance the everyday experience...to inspire and be inspired. I'm open to whatever materials it takes to make such a proposition.

BM: Your new exhibition in Philadelphia at my gallery is

titled "Temples, Towers and Totems." Can you talk about this exhibition and what you are exploring?

I want to answer this question by picking up on the last question first. When I work on paper, I am exploring a three-dimensional world two dimensionally, but I am not representing that third dimension--I am creating a dimension, period. When I am working on sculpture, I am also thinking about two-dimensional reality as I develop the sculptural surface. Currently, I am working on a woven wood splint and metal grid temple tower. I painted and stamped words on the wood splints as if they were strips of paper. Then I weave them into the three-dimensional metal wire gridded temple tower. In so doing, I have now resolved an issue I have had as to how to do large works on canvas. Working between media gives me insights in each separate medium that I simply could not achieve otherwise.

Now, as for the title of the show, well, I have been making the temple image or temple environments for 27 years. It is a meditation for me. I know the temple like I know my body and like I know my soul and spirit. The exploration is deeply spiritual for me and metaphysical and mythic. The temples are our spirits....they are all alike but each is slightly different from the other...but all are temples. A number of temples in the show have stretched vertically and become surprisingly human in proportion. The towers are a form I have studied for years. The tower is an elevation of the temple to a place of prominence in a landscape. In one sense the tower is an exaggeration of a pedestal. Tom Gaines told us not to put works of art on pedestals...that was considered old hat, exhausted. I've always respected that notion, but at the same time, I've always wanted to break that "rule." I've done that in this show! Lastly, the totem is in a sense a peaceful warrior's shield. It not only marks a place of transformation, it also protects the spot. We are at war with the world. It is

my job as an artist and guide to offer a passage away from the insanity toward a world of contemplation, calm and integration. Though this work is contemporary art in every sense of the word, the show is also about centering our beings and transcending what has become a crazed norm. I feel the words in my work alone, even without the temple form, are cause for contemplation.

BM: What do you want people to see and feel when they are in front of your work?

Well, we are taking about my dreaming, right? Okay, I am dreaming now that people walk up to my work from a distance. They assume this architectural object (or whatever it is) is banded with color and is textured. As they approach it, their assumptions are challenged. The texture is not from paint but from carving. The texture is also from words stamped onto the surface. What are the words? "temple soul spirit shroud" Is this a temple? Is it a soul? Is it a spirit? Is it a shroud? What is a temple, soul, spirit or shroud? Are they related? If it is a temple, where would it exist? What would the environment look like? Is this an ancient temple or is it contemporary? Is this some kind of religion? Is this a cult? Should I be afraid? Or can I look into this world depicted here? Is this a device for meditation? Can I make a prayer here? Maybe this is about playing house!? I feel somehow calm standing here next to this human-sized creation! Is this like a spirit? Is this a dream? I just woke up from my dream. Does that answer your question?

BM: I think so and then some! I do feel a sense of calm being in front of your works and a sense of power. I also feel a sense of enlightenment and delight as if you have tapped into spirituality, pop art and the new...that there is much to discover standing in front of your sculptures. They keep

unfolding very slowly with a surprise each moment.

BM: Why do you think your work is important right now in the art world?

PO: I feel that we live in very scattered times. We are moving faster and faster and are less and less centered in nature and our connection to it. Artists are the descendants of ancient shamans. We are here to look at our cultures and to work to heal them and bring them into balance. There is so much to love and to be excited about in our world. This Internet technology we are communicating on at this very moment is mind expanding in and of itself. All types of current art fascinate me. But, I have to say that so often it all becomes like the technology, fast and crisp and clean and both easy and hard to digest. Often I am excited but not inspired. What I am attempting to bring to the art world--and to the world--is a reverence for mystery. In our culture we express, express, express and fix and fix and fix and change everything. What if we stopped trying to understand everything, describe everything, dominate everything and simply contemplated an object that is tapped into the mystery of life? What if art really could be both sacred and profane at the same time? What if a temple that I make could also speak to an ancestor from 20 generations back...or even further and to 10 generations down the line? I want contemporary art to express the mystery of life and to inspire reverence for life. Maybe that isn't such a hot idea. But in my heart I know it is, and I am lucky to have many people see in my work this vision. They resonate with the notion of the temple. They take a piece home and find that it has a calming and inspiring influence. I hear this over and over again.

BM: Your response leads us very naturally into my last question. How do you feel when people purchase your sculptures and bring them into their home environments?

PO: Humbled. This work comes through me. To say I create it is to not give credit to where credit is due. I am inspired by nature and by the struggles and inspirations of our lives. I am a repository of aesthetics from so many souls, so many teachers, and friends and loved ones. "My" work is the expression of these mysteries outside me, coming through me and recreated in various material forms. Sometimes I don't even feel I make the temple. Sometime I feel it is made in the eyes of the viewer. I am saying, "Come on, let's play!" And people say "Okay!" They buy the work, take it home and are inspired. In our minds we enter through the temple doorway and are transformed in the process. It reassures me that a vision I have had since childhood is, as Native Americans say, "powerful medicine." I am deeply honored to be the vehicle.