

One New Work

WALTER MAY:
Object Lessons

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One New work is a series of three small, focussed exhibitions curated by Nancy Tousley and presented at Glenbow in 2016.

Each exhibition features a new work by an artist shown with other works or objects selected to provide it with a context. The aim is to illuminate aspects of the artist's practice by emphasizing them.

The context can take many different directions. It might be provided by an artist's earlier, related works; preparatory sketches or maquettes for the new artwork; art from Glenbow's collection, artifacts or archival material from Glenbow's collection; art or artifacts from the artist's collection, and so on.

Walter May: Object Lessons, on view in the *One New Work* gallery from February 27 to May 22, 2016, is the first exhibition in this series.

WALTER MAY: OBJECT LESSONS

Walter May makes sculpture by joining or juxtaposing two or more objects that he finds abroad in the world. He does not sculpt, model or cast. He will sometimes build a support or a framing device that he incorporates into a work; he will sometimes carve wood or tar. But he uses few of the other traditional processes that sculptors employ to shape raw materials. His primary materials are found objects, which he collects as an ongoing part of his process and, most of the time, alters only slightly.

Gathered from flea markets, second-hand stores and back lanes, things arrive in the studio as readymades. Old tools, fragments of trees, idiosyncratic tables, walking canes, bowls, bentwood chairs, burls, and tripods are among the recurring objects May has used during the past 15 years represented by works in this exhibition. Given his propensity for certain kinds of

objects, his collecting is not random but neither does it happen with a specific project in mind. His collecting is a continual process without a fixed end beyond building an inventory of things from which to make sculpture.

His work has an improvisational character; it is assembled from discrete parts that he allows to maintain their identity even as he recycles and repurposes the objects he collects. These are either deadfall, if taken from nature, or things showing the patina of age that are obsolete or derelict or otherwise detached from their mostly utilitarian functions. To fulfill their new purpose as the building blocks of sculpture, May replaces their utility with metaphorical allusions or symbolic meanings. However, a striking visual or physical characteristic or a cultural inscription already invested in the object when May finds it also attract him. He is



Beam, Bowl, Burl 2015

interested in an object's history and how it shows itself in surface incident and wear or in how it was made or in how aberrations of nature interrupted its growth patterns. His intention is that his actions as an artist will leave an object no less than he found it.

May alters the individual elements of a sculpture by cleaning them or burning wooden objects to char the surfaces, and paying close attention to the places where objects join together or where they meet a wall or the floor, and where and how they occupy space. He follows the now famous instruction to himself that Jasper Johns wrote in his sketchbook in 1964: "Take an object / Do something to it / Do something else to it. [Repeat.]" ¹ The actions May performs in addition to cleaning, burning and combining might include cutting, planing, rasping, scraping, drilling, dipping, hanging, stacking, clamping, hooking and balancing. Selecting objects and joining them together can be a long-deliberated process. Some objects might inhabit the studio for years, while he tinkers with them and tries them out in combination with other things, before he decides what to do. As for its situation in space, his sculpture can stand on the floor, hang on a wall or be suspended from a ceiling.

"Scavenger and Forager," a work from 2007, could stand in handily as a double-sided portrait of the artist, or the linguistic duo of signifier and signified. The work has much more to say about May's process. It consists of two bentwood café chairs that hang, side by side, on a wall high up near the ceiling, freed from gravity, the floor and their function as seating. May has burned the surface of the left-hand chair to render it a graphic carbon black and retained the natural colour of the chair on the right, leaving it unaltered. Both chairs are hung upside down so that their undersides, bounded by upturned legs, become rack-like containers. The black chair holds lengths of white driftwood, its bark removed by tumbling over river rocks, while the "natural" chair holds sticks with their bark intact.

Pairing and opposition and similarity and difference, including the chairs' positions opposite one another in space, govern their physical and metaphorical relationships. One is night to the other's day, one a



Hooped, 2015

monochrome to a full-colour rendition, one a doppelgänger to its "living" counterpart, an iconic symbol to a concrete thing. Speaking metaphorically of the artist, it can be said that May scavenges and forages to collect the materials he uses to make his work, in this case scavenging for chairs and foraging for deadfall.

The way May works has much in common with Claude Lévi-Strauss' *bricoleur* who responds to the world around him through a process that "involves a 'science of the concrete' (as opposed to our 'civilised' science of the 'abstract.'" ²



Knockout, 2002

This process of *bricolage*, which is "far from lacking logic, in fact carefully and precisely orders, classifies and arranges into structures the *minutiae* of the physical world in all their profusion by means of a 'logic' which is not our own. The structures, 'improvised' or made up (these are rough translations of the process of *bricoler*) as *ad hoc* responses to an environment, then serve to establish homologies and analogies between the ordering of nature and that of society, and so satisfactorily 'explain' the world and make it able to be lived in." ³

May's newest work, "Still Life with Canes" (2016) calls on this science of the concrete in the service of a lifelong concern: the effects that human beings have on the natural world as they attempt to control and exploit it. A play on the still-life genre, which invokes the French term for still life, "nature morte," the sculpture presents a dramatic struggle as if it were taking place in a morgue or autopsy room in a magical universe parallel to the one inhabited by the real objects.

The tableau is transformative. A severely pruned tree laid horizontally on top of a table, becomes improbably transformed into a muscular, bare-chested figure straining to break free of the restraints that hold it to the perforated plaster-encrusted surface. The tree, although dead and disfigured by pruning, seems possessed of an animating spirit. The unusual table suggests some kind of laboratory (it is a castoff from a mold-making and bronze-casting sculpture lab), while the tree is held down by the handles of walking canes pushed through the holes in the tabletop that grip it like hooks.

The life-size table and tree/figure occupy the space of the viewer but the sense of a fictive space of their own that they create around them is separate and distanced. May has inverted the purpose, use or character of the objects. The grotesque horizontal tree, the burned canes that hook and restrain rather than support an upright figure, the odd table that suggests a mad scientist's laboratory rather than a sculptor's casting table all make ordinary appearances seem strange, thus opening their meaning as objects to allusion and unexpected interpretations. These are strategies of the contemporary *bricoleur*.

May's career began in the mid 1970s when *bricolage* was a term that already had entered the vocabulary of postmodernist sculpture. In his own work the "science of the concrete" yields a kind of poetic speech that involves using objects and materials as though they were akin to units of a language whose ability to make sense is dependent upon syntax. "For Lévi-Strauss, the *bricoleur* 'speaks not only with things . . . but also through things.'" ⁴ The idea that artists like May think with and through materials also pervades the present moment. Writing in 2005 about Gabriel Orozco, an artist whom May admires, Briony Fer observed that for Orozco process means something different than it did for post-Minimalists. "Against a 'specific object' is set an indeterminate one in a permanent state of incompletion," writes Fer. "Material process is a thought process, not a product, let alone a *finished* product. Conversely, thought is manifested as material. Thinking occurs through things, where material things are a necessary

condition of thought. This suggests that we do not think *about* things so much as *through* things." 5

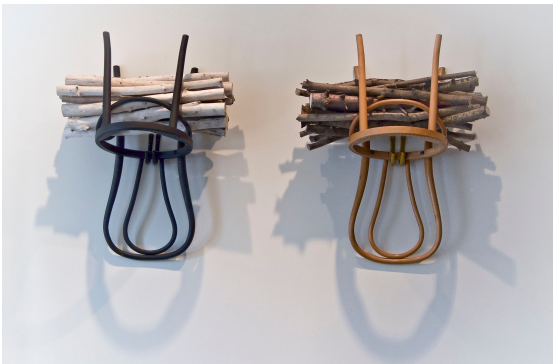
And, of course, postmodernist works of art can be read through things and materials. Both have the ability to function as signs that can be understood as an actual object and a conceptual referent and as a signifier (the image, symbol or sound represented, as in a "word") and a signified (the concept distinguished from the sign that communicates it). However, the signified and signifier in an object-sign resemble each other. Another difference from the linguistic sign is that in a work of *bricolage* the object-sign, although still open to interpretation and associations, is particular and specific rather than abstract and arbitrary, and yet is still able to point to larger significations through the structure of the work, which might even include narrative, as in "Still Life with Canes."

May, in fact, finds affinities between art making and writing when he points to the reciprocal nature of the advice given to writers by the late novelist and essayist David Foster Wallace. First, "never forget that what you're engaged in is a communication to another human being" and second, learn "to pay attention in different ways. Not just reading a lot, but paying attention to the way the sentences are put together, the clauses are joined, the way the sentences go to make up a paragraph." 6 As a sculptor May pays attention not only to the physical joining of one object to another as an aspect of careful craftsmanship but also to the conceptual connections between and among objects that are capable of complexity as they produce or infer meanings beyond themselves.

A chair, which presupposes someone to use it, refers to an absent referent that is a person or by way of extension the human body. A bentwood chair, invented in the mid-19th century by Michael Thonet, refers to social congress via its use in bistros and cafés and to industrial mass production, which it anticipated as the first chair to be produced industrially. An old hammer, like the 105 hammers in "Knockout" (2002), refers to making by hand and to the blunt power of the object itself, especially when repeated 105 times. Considered in light of the title, the repetition is a kind of comical overkill. However, May has burned the handles of the



Plank, 2015



Scavenger and Forager 2007

hammers, which has made them beautiful and fragile, and has rendered the tools dysfunctional.

The paradox of the dysfunctional utilitarian object, such as the burned hammer or the inverted chair raised high above the floor, has been a theme of May's work since 1979. He is likewise fond of visual/verbal puns like those in the conjunction of the many hammers and the title "Knockout." (May's puns bring language and humor directly into his work.) He selects many outdated, outmoded, discarded or handmade objects for characteristics that lift them out of the ordinary or make them mysterious, attributes that make him wonder what the maker or user was thinking. His eye is likewise attuned to aberrations of nature.

The tree in "Still Life with Canes" (2016) already offers interesting potential as a sign because the way it was pruned has distorted its treeness. Its meaning becomes even more complex when

the artist turns the tree horizontally — how it lay when he found it after it was cut down — and situates it on a perforated metal table where it appears to be restrained by the canes. The tall, vertical, more abstract "Transect" (2000) features an uncommonly long curvilinear tree limb set on a small metal tripod at the bottom and affixed at the top to a wall by the metal tips of the legs of a wooden tripod, a type used for two hundred years by surveyors and photographers. In this work a Frankensteinian nature fitted with metal prosthetics is figured as the subject of scientific measurement and documentation that, like the tree figure in "Still Life with Canes," is straining at its fetters. Inappropriately harnessed to each other as they are here neither nature nor science can function properly.

May creates dysfunctional hybridity in sculptures made completely with manufactured goods as well. By placing a windsock hoop inside the open seat of a

bentwood chair, another hoop, and hanging it high on the wall he produces an ambiguous tangle of black lines, like a concrete three-dimensional drawing in air. It is difficult to read the punning sculpture, entitled "Hooped" (2005), as two separate objects and, as the slang meaning of the title suggests, the visual conundrum has no obvious solution. On the other hand, "Beam, Burl, Bowl" (2015) presents a clearly articulated stack of objects all made of wood. The heavy burl is offset on top of the post and held by two slender canes, whose handles hook into holes drilled into in the side of this support. On top of the burl a wooden bowl appears ready to slide off, but to understand the sculpture's precarious balance requires bending over to observe the empty spaces between the burl, canes and beam.

A sculpture like "Plank" (2015) operates somewhat differently, although May has again changed the original spatial orientation of a functional object. Once a painter's scaffold, "Plank" (2015) rests vertically against a wall, its top third burned to a velvety black that contrasts with the paint splattered wood of the lower portion. May has attached a metal pole, a former handrail, to the right side and on the left inserted wooden handles and a short length of freshly cut raw wood that seems to pierce the plank and keeps it at an angle from the wall. The accumulation of marks, holes and incidents such as the multi-colour paint splatters conveys a sense of the temporal that testifies to the past, the present moment and also to the future.

Temporality and hapless dysfunction, everydayness and magical transformation,

Still Life with Canes, 2016



ephemerality and obstinate robustness, comical suggestion and dark implications are characteristics of May's sculpture through which he builds a sense of an "other" world. It is hard not to imagine an alter ego, a *bricoleur* who scavenges and forages in this world to create that other one. Like May the alter ego would be mindful of the fragmentation and precarious condition of the world, mocking of the human impulse to control natural forces that are incompletely understood, and curious but not nostalgic

about the past. May himself likes to quote Steve Jobs, who observed, "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future." ⁷ For May, the lesson is in the objects.

1. Jasper Johns, sketchbook page, February 8, 2016, shown on [www.scoopit.com/s/Museum-of-Modern-Art-\(MOMA\)-180/?h=1440255180](http://www.scoopit.com/s/Museum-of-Modern-Art-(MOMA)-180/?h=1440255180)

2. Terence Hawkes, quoted in Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 103.

3. Ibid 103-104.

4. Claude Lévi-Strauss quoted in Anna Dezueze, "Assemblage, *Bricolage* and the Practice of Everyday Life," *Art Journal* Vol. 67, No. 1 (Spring, 2008), p. 31.

5. Briony Fer, "The Scatter Sculpture as Leftover" in Helen Molesworth ed., *Part Object Part Sculpture* (Pennsylvania State University Press and Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 2005), p. 224.

6. Email from the artist, August 12, 2014, with link to David Foster Wallace, "David Foster Wallace on Writing, Self-Improvement, and How We Become Who We Are," Brainpickings, <http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2014/08/11/david-foster-wallace-quack-this-way/>, accessed Jan. 31, 2016.

7. Steve Jobs, quoted at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/463176-you-can-t-connect-the-dots-looking-forward-you-can-only>, accessed Feb. 8, 2015.

Walter May is a senior Canadian artist based in Calgary. Although he is known primarily as a sculptor, his practice also includes drawing, digital photography, installation and performance art. He recently retired from the Alberta College of Art and Design, where he taught in the sculpture program. May's extensive exhibition record includes more than 24 solo and collaborative exhibitions or projects, and numerous, invitational and group exhibitions.

Nancy Tousley is a Governor General's Award-winning art critic, arts journalist and independent curator. Tousley was art critic of the Calgary Herald for more than 30 years and the first Critic-in-Residence at the Alberta College of Art and Design, Calgary. She has been a contributing editor to Canadian Art magazine since 1986.



Transet, 2000

List of Works

"Transet," 2000

Wooden tripod, metal tripod, branch.
66cm x 274cm x 213.5 cm. Dimensions
may vary due to tripod adjustment. (26" x
9' x 7')

Collection of the Artist, Calgary, Alberta

"Knockout," 2002

105 hammers with burned handles, 2 x 4,
2x2 braces
472.4cm. x 45.7cm x 16.7cm (15.5' x 18"
x 6.5")

Collection of the Nickle Galleries, Calgary,
Alberta

"Beam, Burl, Bowl," 2015

Painted wooden post, tree burl, burned
wooden bowl, two burned wooden canes,
magnet, casters.
55.8 cm x 106.5 cm x 66cm. (22" x 42" x
26")

Collection of the Artist, Calgary, Alberta

"Hooped," 2015

Steel windsock frame, burned bentwood
chair frame, hardware.
61cm x 83.2 cm x 76.2 cm. (24" x 33" x
30")

Collection of the Artist, Calgary, Alberta

"Plank," 2015

Wooden plank, wooden bars and
handles, galvanized steel pipe.
41.3 cm x 266.7cm x 40.6cm. (16 1/4" x
105" x 16")

Collection of the Artist, Calgary, Alberta

"Still Life with Canes," 2016

Perforated metal table, plaster, clay, paint,
tree, 12 canes.
244cm x 198cm x 76.2cm. (8' x 78" x
30")

Collection of the Artist, Calgary, Alberta

"Scavenger and Forager," 2007

Two bentwood chairs, driftwood, sticks.
87.6 cm x 193 cm x 45.7 cm (34" x 76" x
17.75")

Collection of the Alberta Foundation for
the Arts, Edmonton, Alberta