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Awkward Silence

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Awkward Silence

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

By

Paul David Richey

B.F.A Mississippi State University, 2012

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Abstract

My work has a strong formal quality and a deep relation to minimalism without ever buying into it. Through tension and inserting my personal experience into the making of the work, but not always within the meaning of the work, I leave the viewer to draw their own conclusions.

Keywords: Wood, Sculpture, Minimalism, Postminimalism

Introduction

Nearly a decade ago I walked into my first day of college at Mississippi State University with the dream that when I graduated I would move on to a life as a highly paid Graphic Designer. Those visions started to fade away as I started work in some of my foundations courses; I'd never really made art before I got to college, it hadn't hit me as a thing I wanted to do yet. Over Fall Break of the first semester I went to New York City for the second time (my first time to look at art) with a group from school that was mixed between studio artists and graphic designers. As the week went on I felt myself feel less like Graphic Design was the thing for me as I walked around museums and galleries and found myself immersed in one of Jackson Pollock's giant canvases at MoMA. I can't even begin to tell you where I first heard of or saw Pollock's work as a kid growing up in Pearl, Mississippi, but I can tell you that it has always stuck with me and every time I see his work in a gallery or museum it's like greeting an old friend.

The next semester I took my first sculpture class of any kind and had my life forever changed. Our first assignment was an "Everyday Multiples" project, which required us to go to the dollar store and find a product that was sold in multiples: matches, Styrofoam cups, straws, playing cards, etc.

and create a sculpture from it. I ran across some traditional slotted clothespins and decided that this was what I had to use. After quite a few failed attempts at making something happen, I lined a long row of the clothespins up and wrapped wire around their prongs and heads, I then proceeded to roll them into a bundle. From there, I knew something else needed to happen, so I did what any 18-year-old boy in a sculpture class would do, I lit the propane torch and set the bundle ablaze. What happened next changed my world forever.

For our critique, my professor invited a few thesis year students to join us. When my turn came one of the older students began to describe what the piece made him feel. The way I had the clothespins standing on their prongs made them look like human figures and the wire I had wrapped around them along with the blackened surface from burning the wood created this image of slaves on a ship for him and all the history involved with that. In that moment, he got choked up and almost started to cry and that was when I first realized the power that art could hold, the power to reach deep inside someone and affect their emotions in this mysteriously powerful way.

My intention with that piece was never to create a commentary on slavery or race. I don't know if I even had an intention besides fulfilling the requirements of the assignment because I was eighteen and still thought I was going to be some hot shot designer. This one assignment, this single moment in time, completely changed everything and started me on the journey I'm still travelling on today. A few months later I took my first Graphic Design class and unsurprisingly did not find the same sort of satisfaction that came with sculpture and I knew for sure that the decision I had come to some months prior was the right one.

My work most often begins with an image in my mind, I usually sketch these ideas right away so that I won't forget them and so I can try to flesh out what the piece is going to be once I bring it to life. From there, I approach the work as a formal investigation of form and material, but somewhere along the way, a deeper sense of meaning will sometimes rise to the surface. Tension plays a large part in a lot of my work and exploring that idea has become important to me. I grew up an only child in a Mississippi town (where I never truly fit in), so tension, anxiety, loneliness, and feeling out of place are normal to me. I think that these emotions show up in my work in different ways and places simply because I still have a lot

of these feelings to this day. Therefore, my work comes from a very personal place instead of an academic or art-historical place, which makes it frustrating to discuss in an academic context because so much of the academics of art is based only in the formal rather than the emotional qualities of the work. I am interested in the potential of the emotional aspects of the work just as much as I am in exploring the potential of materials within my work.

Minimalism

My work has been compared to Minimalism since undergrad.

My work is simple in many ways but it is certainly not Minimalist by definition, according to James Meyer:

...Minimal art tends to consist of single or repeated geometric forms. Industrially produced or built by skilled workers following the artist's instructions, it removes any trace of emotion or intuitive decision-making, in stark contrast to the Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture that preceded it during the 1940s and 1950s. Minimal work does not allude to anything beyond its literal presence, or its existence in the physical world. Materials appear as materials; colour (if used at all) is non-referential. Often placed in walls, in corners, or directly on the floor, it is an installational art that reveals the gallery as an actual place, rendering the viewer conscious of moving through this space.¹

¹ Meyer, James. *Minimalism*. London: Phaidon, 2010. p.15.



Figure 1. *Cradle*, 2014.

My earlier square sculptures (fig. 1) were often misread as Minimalist while I did use repeated geometric forms (squares) to build them, they were all hand cut by me to similar sizes and nothing was ever exact because I was cutting thousands at a time. I used a low-cost luan, a type of plywood, in its raw state without any sanding or paint - the edges rough from being cut on a band saw and the heads of the nails I used to assemble the pieces and the holes they created were all visible in the final product. These pieces were certainly utilizing a grid in the rectangular format of the luan I

used to make them but the assembly was completely intuitive: each square was placed according to how it fit with the piece nailed before it.

Where Minimalism claims to be non-referential and alluding only to itself and its own objecthood, my work alludes to something, even if that something is simply the material, process, or something more. The shapes that form in my mind that later become the sculptures I build come from my subconscious creating an amalgamation of the things I've seen in my life—simple, abstract representations of the structures of my environment. With my titles, I try to give some clue as to what I feel about the meaning of a work but even then, I want the names to be slightly vague so that the viewer can still wonder and not simply take what is given to them. I enjoy using titles of songs as it adds another layer to the emotional response the viewer has to the piece, depending upon their knowledge of a particular song. The sculptures aren't illustrations of the song and the use of song titles acts as a suggestion of my state of mind while making a particular work.

My work also differs from Minimalism in the way I scale and finish the pieces. A lot of the work in Minimalism used industrial material in a raw state that often evoked this sense of machismo which didn't quite exist for

most of the artists in their process since they weren't the ones carrying out the production of the pieces in many cases. However, the bravado of sculpture isn't just limited to Minimalism. Historically, sculpture was created as a monument to something, whether it was God, gods, kings, or the sculptors themselves. In his "Notes on Sculpture: Part 2," Robert Morris discusses size of sculpture and its relation to intimacy:

That is, besides providing the condition for a set of responses, large-sized objects exhibit size more specifically as an element. It is the more conscious appraisal of size in monuments that makes for the quality of "scale." The awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one's body size, and the object. Space between the subject and object is implied in such a comparison. In this sense space does not exist for intimate objects. A larger object includes more of the space around itself than does a smaller one. It is necessary literally to keep one's distance from large objects in order to take the whole of any one view into one's field of vision. The smaller the object the closer one approaches it and, therefore, it has correspondingly less of a spatial field in which to exist for the viewer.²

Whereas Morris' sculptures are objects that take up a large amount of space, my sculptures usually remain at an intimate scale that rarely gets much bigger than human size. The pieces that do reach a more human proportion encourage the viewer to approach them. For example, *Square*

² Morris, Robert. "Notes on Sculpture: Part 2." *Artforum*. October 1966. Vol. 5. p.21.

One (fig. 2) is a little over six feet tall but only weighs around five pounds. The piece is made up of a thin plank of Yellow Cedar that is curved from the floor and held in place by a block of Douglas Fir with a beveled edge attached to the wall at the top of the curve. Even though the tension of the plank is unnerving in a certain way, the scale and finish of the piece invites the viewer closer and eases the anxiety of the piece. If *Square One* were made of steel, it would become a very menacing sculpture but being made from wood and including that little bit of turquoise at the top makes it inviting even if the tension of the plank might make the viewer apprehensive. If it was twenty feet tall, it would become much more menacing than if it were one foot tall. If you compare my piece *Plowshares* (fig. 3) to *Square One*, even though it isn't that much smaller, the seemingly fragile nature of the thin, bent pole changes the viewers feelings. They may still feel nervous or anxious but it isn't from fear of the piece, rather a fear for it. *Square One* feels as though it could come free from the wall and smack you, whereas *Plowshares* has the feeling of possibly breaking itself.



Figure 2. *Square One*. 2016



Figure 3. *Plowshares*. 2017

Formalism

Ultimately, I'm a Formalist. Form and the actual making of the art is what concerns me the most. But in saying that I also have to acknowledge that the work comes from somewhere within me and my preferences, experiences and skill set allow for layered readings of the work if the viewer can decipher it. I've always had a hard time explaining how I feel about Formalism and how in the last thirty years we've been in a place in contemporary art that often doesn't focus on the form as much as the idea, which is one legitimate perspective but this isn't what motivates

my work. Dave Hickey sums up my feelings fairly well in his essay

Formalism:

Formalists analyze events that have already happened. They don't teach us how to "enjoy" art. They investigate the consequences of parts (words, notes, colors) that usually remain unrecognized to us...

...I want to emphasize the fact that formalism doesn't do dictionary, darling; it doesn't do answers; it doesn't do pictures of art; and it doesn't do coerced looking. Formalism speculates on the intensity and possible longevity of tangible art that elicits an instantaneous visual or emotional confirmation.³

This is how I feel and in part what I've been trying to say about my work but haven't been able to successfully articulate. Maybe the critical theory I've studied led me to believe that I was wrong for thinking these things. Martin Puryear is chief among artists whose work and thoughts on art I admire. His descriptions of what he values in art are much the same as mine and the work that I've made for my thesis exhibition, *Awkward*

Silence:

I value the referential quality of art, the fact that a work can allude to things or states of being without in anyway representing them. The ideas that give me rise to a work can be quite diffuse, so I would describe my working process as a kind of distillation—trying to make coherence out of things that seem contradictory. But coherence is not the same as resolution. The most interesting art for me retains a flickering quality, where

³ Hickey, Dave. *Pirates and Farmers*. London: Ridinghouse. 2013. p.87-88.

opposed ideas can be held in tense coexistence.⁴

Process and Material

Most of the wood I use in my work is from trees that are indigenous to Mississippi and/or the South. Every time I cut into the material, I'm hit with the familiar smell that reminds me of home. Pine specifically reminds me of the first warm days after winter, when the sun heats up the fallen pine straw and the smell permeates the air, a blessing and a curse as it foretells the humid summer days to come.

I'm not sure when exactly I made up my mind that wood was going to be my go-to material but, looking back, I can see why it happened. That first piece I made in undergrad was made of wood and the effect on my instructor and classmates in that critique was such that the desire to continue exploring wood as material was planted in my mind. I enjoy the associative properties of wood, the memories that a certain smell or look of wood can bring forth. Ursula von Rydingsvard, who is known for her monumental Cedar sculptures, said in an interview with NPR that she,

⁴ Elderfield, John, Michael Auping, and Martin Puryear. *Martin Puryear*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007. p.77.

“...wants to break people’s sentimental attachment to wood, ‘which is you know, in the land of the elves or in a storybook for children...I don’t want the cuteness associated with the wood, or even the nostalgia.’”⁵ I don’t agree with this description of wood being some fairy tale material; it certainly can be if your intent is to make something whimsical with it, but that is in those certain cases. Some of the nostalgia associated with wood is important to what I want my work to achieve, whether it elicits a longing or simply sparks a memory, without a precedence for wood in people’s lives, there would be less for them to relate to in my work. After my grandfather died when I was in 8th grade, another family member built a Cedar chest that we put some of his belongings in. Now, whenever I smell Aromatic Cedar, I think of opening that chest and remembering my grandfather.

I’m ambivalent about using steel or other materials in my work. There’s something too cold about steel for me. It’s very unforgiving and its industrial associations make it difficult to get away from a feeling of utility, although I haven’t completely given up on it for use in my future practice.

⁵ Michel, Karen. Interview with Ursula von Rydingsvard. *Weekend Edition Sunday*. NPR, April 23, 2013.

The one metal I have had success with is bronze. During my first semester at the University of New Orleans, I found a severed bird wing on the floor of the foundry while sweeping up and preparing for an aluminum pour. What I initially intended to be an experiment with the foundry process became a successful bronze of a bird's wing.

As the bird's wing was somewhat impossible to make a mold of to cast in wax (as is the normal process with bronze) because the feathers would have separated as the silicone was poured around it, I instead attached the wing to a wax cup and sprue and poured the investment mixture of plater and sand directly over that. The investment is the mold that is eventually filled with bronze after the wax is melted out of a normal casting, but in this case I essentially cremated the remains of the bird wing and blew out the ashes with an air hose to prepare for the pouring of the bronze. What has come from this process of casting birds are these very odd pieces that I don't quite know how to finish. I later found a dead Finch and cast it whole using the same process as the wing with great success. The bronzes themselves become these beautiful little monuments to the dead birds. Historically, bronze was used to create large scale statues to commemorate significant people and events. When the material is used on

this small scale, especially with the final product being such a detailed mold of a bird, the pieces really speak to the fragility and beauty of life and how there is more than one way to be immortal. Now, this dead Finch is forever memorialized in bronze. For now the bronzes remain incomplete because I haven't been able to determine how they need to be finished. Can they simply exist by themselves as objects or do they need an added element such as a wooden base or perch? Only time will tell if they become finished pieces.

I have also worked directly with foundry wax to make molds for bronze with some success. Though casting sheets of wax and then cutting them up into a geometric form and using a hot plate to melt the wax and give it texture, I found a way to make a bronze piece that still showed the gesture of how it was made. I've only made one piece this way but it was made with the intention of attaching it to a carved wooden piece which I realize now was somewhat detrimental to the piece itself. I didn't have a sketch of what the carved element would look like, instead I attached the bronze to a block of Spanish Cedar and began to carve away at it in a way that attempted to respond to the bronze form but in my mind, fell short of being a successfully finished piece.

Candidacy

My candidacy semester was an extremely difficult one. I was feeling extremely low and directionless in the program, I thought of whether I should drop out or soldier on daily. On top of those feelings, my dad was diagnosed with Parkinson's after a summer spent worrying if he had ALS (his brother died of that when I was 19) and the year before that watching the end effects of Parkinson's on my grandfather after he received a late diagnosis. Things weren't easy but I found a way to use those emotions in the work I was making. I failed my first run at candidacy and for my second review I made new sculpture and reworked my outline, the former did a lot more for my future in the program than the latter.

The piece I made was *Lament* (fig. 4). At the time, I was trying to find a way to balance what I wanted out of art, school, life, and the hand I was being dealt by these things. It made sense that I was drawn to a form that was balancing two objects and being bent under the weight of them. The chunk of Oak that acted as the fulcrum was one I pulled from a firewood pile at a campground just outside of the town where I went to undergrad. That pile functioned more as a lumber yard than as a burn pile for me, I

gathered a dozen or so rough sawn Oak boards from the pile and a few other various chunks of wood; most of which I used in the pieces I made.



Figure 4. *Lament*. 2015.

From *Lament*, I began to investigate this idea of balance with a piece I called *Futile Devices* (fig. 5). I was misguidedly trying to be more like Martin Puryear without fully knowing myself as an artist yet. I was trying to add to the elements of balance I used in *Lament*, so I added a pole that extended from the wall to add a new point of tension that also acted as the fulcrum for this piece. The result was a piece that succeeded but never really felt finished.

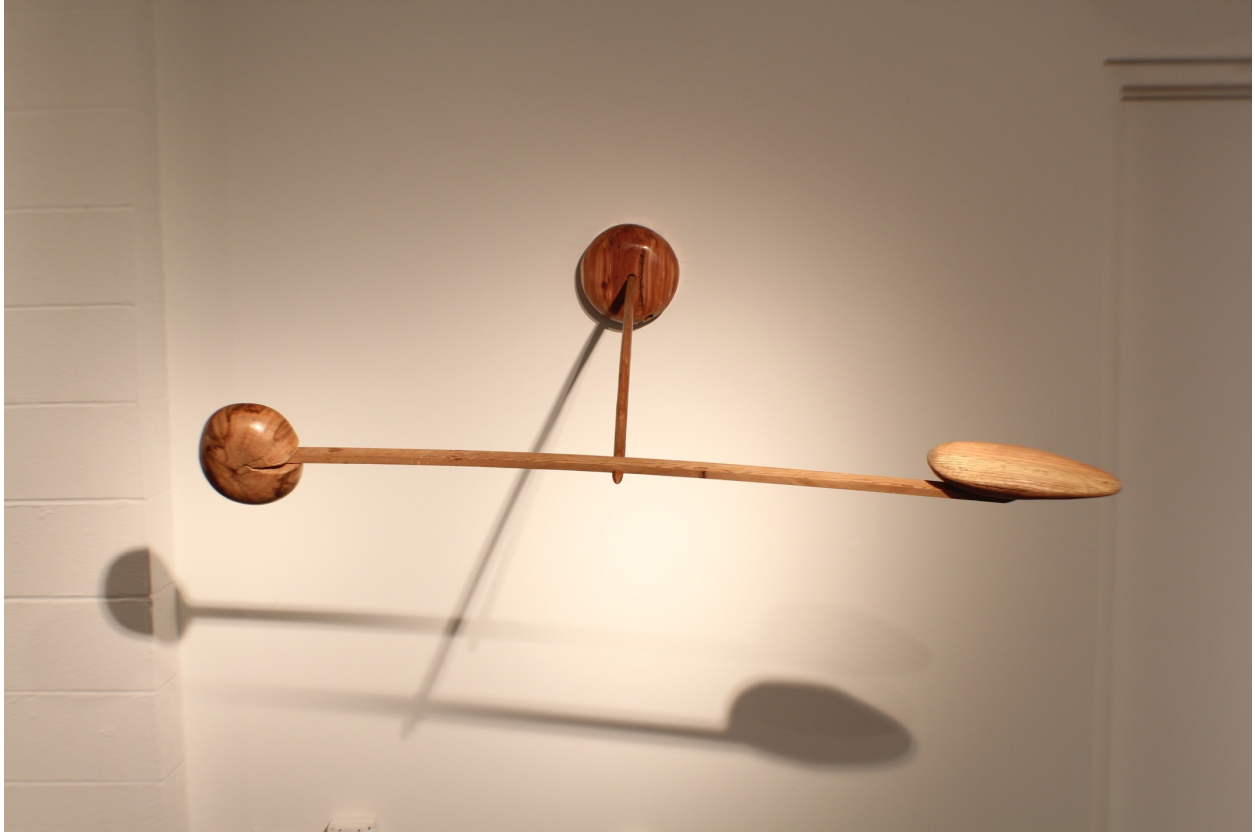


Figure 5. *Futile Devices*, 2015. Installation view, 2017.

Awkward Silence

The title of my show, *Awkward Silence* (fig. 6), comes from those early critiques at the University of New Orleans where I didn't know what I was trying to say and where I felt I didn't want to say anything, that the work should speak for itself. My reticence there came from not wanting to put myself in the work, I only wanted to talk about the work in a formal way but the formal isn't all that's there. I know the viewer won't understand that since it's a bit of an inside joke at this point but I think they will

understand the tension and are hopefully reminded of their personal tensions.



Figure 6. *Awkward Silence*. Installation view, 2017.

The day after I installed my work for the show, *Futile Devices* fell and one of the carved pieces split. Instead of repairing the broken piece, I left the pieces on the floor. I relit the piece and decided to change the name to *The End* (fig. 7). I knew from the beginning that it would be a tough piece to hang and keep up, so I wasn't surprised when I heard that it fell but I wasn't expecting it to be as broken as it was. I had been asked before about how

to show if a piece failed or broke but I didn't have a good answer at the time; this still might not be the best answer but it works in this instance.



Figure 7. *The End*. Installation view, 2017.

My first instinct was to repair the piece or just remove it but I soon realized that I didn't have to. If my aim is to make work that reflects on my experience in the world and the experience of being human, then it doesn't feel right to repair a broken piece that is only broken because of the events set in motion by its creation. If you go skydiving and your parachute doesn't open, there's no going back. In saying that, I must also recognize that there

are people who have benefactors that are always there to clean up their messes and they never really live a true life. Crash your Mercedes, get a newer Mercedes. When *Futile Devices* fell, it became the conclusion of the show and of this body of Graduate work. Taking it out of the show or repairing it and leaving no trace of what happened would have been a disservice to the show, my work, and myself. Whereas leaving it in doubles down on what I am working towards in my work; I don't think that I've reached the goal but I know I'm closer than I was. Leaving a broken piece as it lies in the show recognizes the reality that life doesn't go the way we plan it and we all die one day. It also recognizes that these wooden works carry the scars of where they've been in the same way that humans do, even though ours aren't always visible.

The moment that *Futile Devices* became *The End* helped my show-title, *Awkward Silence*, to be even more poignant than it already was with my choice of sculptures. The viewer needs time with the pieces to see everything there is to be seen within the piece, aesthetic and otherwise. The title also deals with my feelings of anxiety whenever I am asked to discuss or explain my work, my answers always begin with an awkward pause and some strange look of contemplation on my face. With *The End*

now lying broken on the floor, my hope is that the viewer sees it as a broken piece, not as something staged and that it almost becomes like a funeral for the piece. Moving it and installing it somewhere else turns the piece into something staged rather than something that came together during the time between the piece falling, my contemplation about fixing it, and ultimately deciding to just leave it in the space as-is.

The piece *A Song for Our Grandfathers* (fig. 8) uses some of my feelings of nostalgia that I spoke of earlier to create a piece that is a bit of a memorial to my own grandfather. The Cedar I used reminds me of the trunk I spoke of earlier and the plywood form and dark green I chose for the bottom half of the piece are another symbol of my grandfather because he worked for Southern Pine which is a power company; the plywood form loosely resembles the base of a transmission tower and the green is the company's color.



Figure 8. *A Song for Our Grandfathers*. 2017.

Most of the other work in *Awkward Silence* has to do with the material relationships and the overarching formal and conceptual theme of tension that I have recently been exploring with the work. The only exception to this is the piece *September (Of Towers and Innocence)*. (fig. 9)

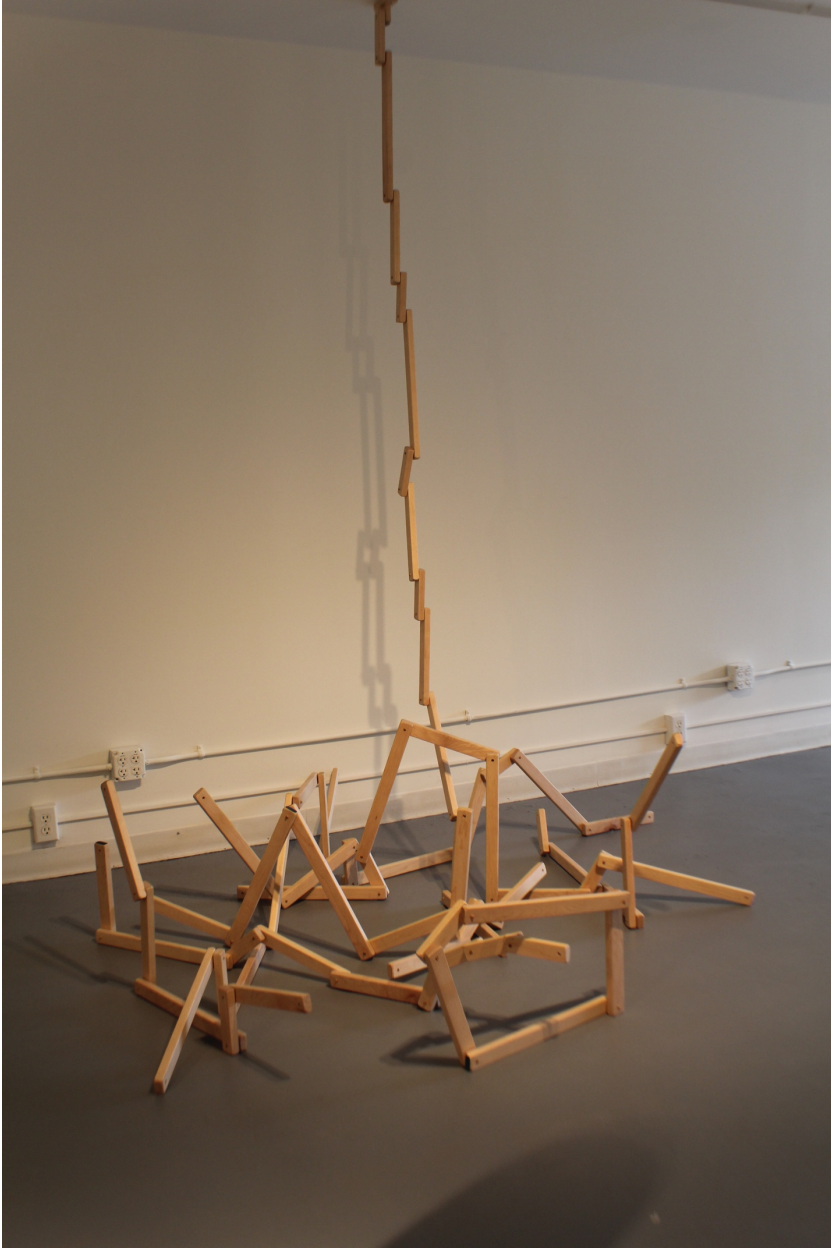


Figure 9. *September (Of Towers and Innocence)*. 2016.

Innocence is a strange thing. Where does it come from, where does it go? I am old enough to remember O.J. Simpson's car chase on the news, the Oklahoma City bombing, Columbine, and a high school shooting in my own community that preceded it, all in the first decade of my life. The event

I remember most vividly, the tragedy that became reality rather than mere happenstance in my psyche was September 11, 2001. I remember like it was yesterday, sitting in my Sixth-Grade Spanish class watching the news as images of the second plane hitting the towers flooded in. It wasn't recorded, it was happening, the towers were falling in real time. This was the moment I lost my innocence, along with the rest of my generation.

The sculpture, *September (of towers and innocence)*, is about this occurrence. I never set out with that intention but as the piece has lived and I've heard people's reactions and associations of it with childhood toys, I realized that this moment is where it came from. When I began that piece, I was thinking about units, structures, and how to simplify the art I was trying to make so that it could illicit a more visceral reaction from the viewer and from myself. I wasn't playing with wooden blocks at age eleven but I was certainly still playing with Legos. In a certain sense, every time I begin to make a sculpture, I'm dealing with a sense of play, setting to work on a piece always makes me feel like a kid in a candy store. I really let the sense of play come out in *September*, I created these blocks that came in three lengths with holes drilled in them for connecting like you would find in a children's toy but not outright copying any specific one. The holes came

after the blocks were cut to size and had their sharp edges rounded. I first thought about using a modified slip joint to connect the pieces so that they would become more interchangeable, or not having the pieces able to be connected at all, just existing in stacks. Somewhere in the process I decided to drill the holes and, using dowels, to connect them and create the various sections of the piece.

For the presentation in my thesis show, I decided to suspend one of the sections of blocks from the ceiling. When I realized how for me, this piece related to a loss of innocence and the fact that as a child the goal of playing with blocks was to build the tallest tower, I knew that this piece had to extend higher than the eighteen or so inches off the floor in some areas. I don't expect everyone who views this piece to see the correlations I see with life after September 11th, but I do feel that most people will be able to come away with some feeling of how they felt when they were young and the potential of our dreams and the world seemed so infinite, when the world seemed so big. I wonder how long someone will look at this piece and think longingly about blocks and childhood before some twisted form of reality comes rushing to them and says how foolish it is for adults to think about playing with blocks. That's the beauty of working the way I do, it

doesn't matter if someone understands the meaning I associate with the work because the works can stand without the obligation.

Conclusion

I doubt that I will ever be able to answer all the questions people might have about my work and I don't know if I necessarily want to. Most days I can't answer all my own questions about my work. As an artist, I don't care whether people like or don't like my work anymore, the far more important thing is whether I am in control of my materials or not and that the work succeeds as art. I think that I'm getting closer every day to being able to fully control and manipulate these materials. My work is rooted firmly in a formalist approach but it isn't opposed to the fact that any work you make has the potential to become more than what I anticipated.

Awkward Silence was a success. People came opening night and responded to the work. They asked questions I couldn't answer and questions that I could. That night made me realize that I've spent too much time trying to chase after and recreate a moment that I experienced with that first critique nearly a decade ago. It also made me realize that though I may not have cried that day, I was equally a part of that viewer's experience because I could see an interpretation of the work I hadn't

intended to make through his eyes. That was the moment I became an artist but I've spent all this time since trying to become what I was already. I had a professor in undergrad who always told us that, "every day we are one step closer to becoming who we've always been."⁶ He also shared this poem by the Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjold:

Thus it was

I am being driven forward
Into an unknown land.
The pass grows steeper,
The air colder and sharper.
A wind from my unknown goal
Stirs the strings
Of expectation.

Still the question:
Shall I ever get there?
There where life resounds,
A clear pure note
In the silence.⁷

This poem has become a mantra, a prayer, and a process in my life and with every piece of art that moves from my head, to a sketchbook, and eventually to objecthood.

⁶ Funderburk, Brent. Personal Communication. May, 2012

⁷ Hammarskjold, Dag, W.H. Auden. *Markings*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964. p.5. a

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Vita

Paul was born in Torrance, California in 1990. He received his BFA in Sculpture from Mississippi State University in 2012. In 2014 he was accepted to the MFA program at the University of New Orleans.