



ASSEMBLE 2010: AUDIO TRANSCRIPTS

Session: Making and Creative Production

Speaker: Andrew Cornell Robinson, Artist

Chair: Dr Jane Harris, Director, Textile Futures Research Centre,
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ANDREW CORNELL ROBINSON: Hi, my name is Andrew Robinson. Thank you for having me here today, and, thanks to the Crafts Council.

What I'd like to do today is talk a little bit about my work in a couple of different spheres. It actually relates to this idea of portfolio practice to some degree that the research talks about. I was trained as a potter about, actually a long time ago, I was actually trained as a potter from the age of ten to eighteen, I was enslaved with child labour by a local potter in my town in New Jersey. I am from the US, if you didn't notice. And, a lot of it was quite mundane drudgery, wedging clay and mopping floors. But it was also exciting too, because there were problems to solve. At the age of eleven I had to build my first kiln, which was a little too close to my mother's tomato patch so I ruined that. But for me, it ingrained a really early sense of rigour and excitement about exploring material with my hands, and that was fascinating.

My work as an artist has spanned a couple of different spheres. I still have a studio practice, I still work with ceramics today. I'm also an educator, I work with a school called the Parsons School of Design in New York City, where I teach everything from drawing to information, design and typography. And I also work in digital design. When I first started doing websites and digital design, one of my teachers that I had is painter Gregory Amenoff, he ran into me on the street and he said, 'What are you doing these days Andrew?' And I said, 'I'm designing websites,' thinking that was very exciting. And he kind of smiled and said that was kind of like, the construction and sheet-rocking job of my

generation, because that's what he did when he got out of school. And, and I thought, it's kind of an interesting problem, because I was dealing with all these different tools, different media, and different worlds to some degree, but I didn't necessarily see how they related. And, as I've had to talk about my work in the past, I've often been asked, what am I looking at, or what are my influences?

So, on the board are just a few of the things that I'm often interested in.

Everything from George Ohr, who's in the upper right-hand corner, a potter, fantastic kind of crazy, wonderful forms that he made, to Kara Walker's beautiful cut paper, to Kiki Smith's wonderful bronze work. Even Philip Guston, the painter, his later work. All of these things dealt with a sense of story, a sense of narrative. Even the most abstract thing had something to say. And that to me drew a lot of my work together.

What I'd like to do is talk about two major influences that started me on this sense of story. The first, strangely enough, was my grandfather, whose name was Robert Bonham, we all called him Papa Bob, and he was a journalist, he was an insurance investigator, he travelled all over the world, he fought in World War II, and, he loved to collect things. My grandmother called him a hoarder and was always complaining that he had too much stuff. But when he started to have a lot of grandchildren, he took up carving, and he carved these amazing reproductions of Victorian wooden articulated dolls. He also had three daughters as well. So, he made things, and even though he did all this other stuff on the side, this was something that he loved. And as a child, one of my favourite stories with Papa Bob was, going to his house, and we'd go nearly every Sunday, and he created a game for us. He actually built a *Wunderkammer*, a cabin of curiosities, and in this thing he had everything from Navajo pottery to kachina dolls, to things that he made, and even some junk, like a cheap glass ring. But what was exciting for me as a kid and for my brothers and my sister is that we could pick anything, it was a game, we could go pick any object from this cabinet and bring it to Papa Bob and he would tell us a new story. And often it was a big, fat fish tale, you know. And always it was a different story. I grabbed this kachina doll three times, and every single time it came from a different place, but it was interesting. But what was fascinating for me is that, he was also able to talk about how this thing was made, what the materials were. Because this was important to him. And it became frankly really important to me as an artist.

Another thing that had a huge influence on me is this guy named Henry Chapman Mercer. Again I grew up in New Jersey, and this guy lived in Pennsylvania, right across the river, not far from Philadelphia. And Mercer was kind of an odd fellow. He lived just north of Philly, and he was really an archaeologist and anthropologist. He lived about 100 years ago. And he was a bit of an anachronistic fellow, he rejected technology to some degree. He had a bicycle and a horse but he didn't have a car. He didn't have electricity in his house. And he built his house by hand. And what's fascinating to me is, this is his house that he built. If you look over on the far, well I guess your right side, is a house that looks like an old farmhouse, in fact that's exactly what it was. And what he did was, he had collected tiles from all over the world, fascinating tiles, Aramaic tiles, Chinese tiles, Japanese tiles, pre-Colombian tiles, this amazing collection. And he took that little farmhouse and then covered it in concrete, encased the entire thing in concrete and rebar. Which was kind of a radical way of building at the time. He was not a builder, he didn't know how to do any of this stuff. He literally had a horse named Lucy and about three guys that helped him put this thing together. And he took the interior of this farmhouse and covered it with mosaic. He then took each room and he built on to it, literally building this giant mansion from the inside out. While he was doing all this, he also was fascinated with, not only pre-Colombian history, that was really interesting to him, but also with what he saw that the modern culture was losing at the time, and he collected probably one of the largest collections of nineteenth-century pre-industrial crafts tools, and you can go to Pennsylvania and visit his place - highly recommended, it's a great place. And it's this giant museum, another giant building, full of everything, from old hand pump fire engines to wheelwrights' tools. He would literally go up to these craftspeople as they were closing their shops and going out of business, and buy everything from them, or he'd dig through the junkyards. And it's a fantastic place to explore.

But what really had an impact on me as a young man were his tiles. When he ran out of his own tile collection to tile this enormous sandcastle of a house, he built a tile factory, a massive tile factory, on his property, and he started to reproduce Moravian tiles, a type of German tile from the area. And he took these tiles and essentially built up the walls of each room, boarded up the

windows of each room, and then filled it up with dirt and junk and, you know, sand, all the way up to the ceiling, and then he would layer tiles face down into the sand, put rebar down and pour concrete, and then he'd open up the windows, dig out the room, and he'd have a new room, a ceiling that has beautiful mosaics on it, and a floor for the next room above. And that's actually how he built the house. It's the craziest thing in the world. The hallways get narrow, people get stuck in them all the time.

And one of the things that again I love about what Mercer did is, he told stories in everything he did, and here's one example of some Caribe Indians eating Europeans on the ceiling of his dining room. This is just an example of the kind of stories that he told.

So I'm going to go quickly, because I've got a bunch of other things to show. But these are just some of the examples of the things that I was exposed to, and I have to say, it had a huge impact on me, to understand what you can do with clay.

So at a very early age I started working with a potter, right around the same time that I first came into contact with Mercer's work. But I also wear a bunch of different hats. I work as an artist, I work as an educator, and I also, strangely enough, work as a digital designer, I do websites and applications and things like that. And, and some other stuff too.

One of the things that for me is really essential as an educator, particularly at Parsons, is to get my students to work, not only verbally or visually, but kinaesthetically. So, for example, this is just some work that my students have done. I teach information design, which can be deadly dry if you teach it in such a boring way, and I try not to do that, hopefully. But often it's taking quantitative data and actually visualising it and telling a story with it. So my students, certainly used the computer to do this, but one of the first things that I often do with them is to bring in untraditional materials. Usually I'll bring in a box of clay, a box of twine, a box of wood, a box of chips, and then ask them to actually create typography from that, or create iconography from that, and then photograph it and scan it and learn to tell stories with materials. And I've got to tell you, when I started to do that in my classes, it engaged some students that I

thought were, would have probably been lost if I'd just talked about the nuances of illustrator and, you know, typography, which can be a little boring for some.

Two students of mine this past year did this great partnership at Parsons, and this is one of the things that we try to do at Parsons, and that is to pair students with industry, and in this case LVMH, the luxury brand; and Parsons did a partnership for a project called The Art of Craftsmanship Revisited, where students chose an artisan from New York City in the regional area, partnered with them, and in this case my students worked with a local letterpress studio. They worked hands-on to understand what a letterpress studio does, and then they took the images, inspiration, the ethos of that studio, and brought it to bear on the construction of a sustainable design for a garment. I'm happy to say they won second prize, which they were just thrilled with, and it ended up with a fashion show and all sorts of stuff, there's a show on right now.

As a designer, I've worked with a variety of things, primarily around product design and digital media, but the key thing that starts for me with design thinking is to start with a story. Rather than designing a product for a whole group of people, we'll design it for one person, let's say a woman named Audrey, and in this case this is a project that I did as a prototype for -for a luxury apparel and cosmetics client. And the idea was to create an experience that tries to relay the visual and kind of theatre of a retail selling environment. So when you go into Saks Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, they put on a big show. They talk about the notes of fragrance and how fantastic it is, and they give you this fantastic history. So the idea was to create a multi-faceted experience that tries to use, in this case, a metaphor of sound to relay the idea of a fragrance. I can't show you this right now because I'm going to run out of time, but, as you're navigating through this experience, there is this beautiful orchestration of music. And I worked with this music designer and technologist to create this prototype. And as Audrey, this person that we told the story about, clicks through, she experiences the client's brand as well as finds the product she's looking for.

Really quickly, I'm going to click through a couple of images and then I'm going to get off the stage. My work as an artist spans a variety of different materials,

but primarily ceramics. In this past year I've started a kind of a weird collaborative project with a fashion designer, a DJ, a bespoke tailor from Panama, a fashion photographer who works for the Gap, and we all came together around a story about two historical figures. That's me up there in the pink. And the figures were, a general from the American Revolutionary war who was really macho and really kind of, you know, studly, and we turned him into a bit of a fop and a dilettante; and the other one was a woman who was a farmer from the Dominican Republic who blew up a police station and fought the Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo. These are real people, but we've told these fantastic stories about them and used those to bring to bear with these other artisans and makers, some of who would never be considered craftspeople, and we used these stories to create almost like a fake historical society. Garments were created by hand, buttons were even crafted, images were printed, ceramic objects were created, even furniture was built, and put on this kind of fantastic story, which I have to say was quite fun to work on, and bring together photography and different disciplines. So in the end, my work has really been about bringing together both material and narrative, hopefully in unexpected ways, to help other artisans and technologists to collaborate across disciplines. Thank you very much.

Further information about Andrew Cornell Robinson's work can be found at the arts + crafts research Studio website: www.acrstudio.com.



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