

ARTifice: Fear and Loathing in DC

Reviews and Art Happenings in Washington DC and Beyond

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Ross Rudel at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Back to the mid-60s. Imagine the stereotypical hippie artist making his stereotypical "Nature Rocks!" commentary with his stereotypical hippie vibes, paisley shirt, and stereotypical dream sequences. Imagine his message, a combination of a desired shared experience and a need to showcase his personal moments and altered versions of consciousness. Imagine this all too familiar vibe alive and well in 2010. And imagine if it worked.

Ross Rudel's *burgeon*, showing at the Jack Shainman Gallery in the Chelsea district of New York, is oddly simple yet impeccably profound. His combination of personal, spiritual, and material smoothly works as a contemporary collection. While many of his roots overlap, the majority appears to be a mix of Native American faith culture and hippie background with a profound respect for nature via his beginnings in Black Hills, Montana. He blends this, however, with more modern events and personal recollection to an end that draws in viewers rather than relegating them to the past with an eye roll and a black-lit Jimi Hendrix poster.

Upon entering the gallery, it becomes clear that Rudel's work is not defined by a style—even the hippie subculture acts as a softened undertone. There are no stylistic tells in his choice of materials, ranging from wood to nylon to algae to playing cards. Rather, each work is inherently unique owing to its—literally—inspired conception. In each work, his process adapts the material and the making to his concept, a process shared by Charles Ray, Cornelia Parker, and Maya Lin, among others. Beginning with an idea, a memory, or a dream, Rudel chooses his resources and combines them with a skilled but slow approach, taking at times a year to work out a design before implementing it.

His material, while varied, tends toward the natural, an intriguing characteristic when contrasted with some of his more current subject matter. For example, *Gog* deals with the war in Iraq and its corresponding tensions between Western culture and the

native culture. Paralleling his materiality to the concept, Rudel carved an Islamic geometric pattern onto a Mulberry log, its contrast incredibly tactile and apparent between the sharp yet curving edges of each carved shape in response to the smooth, rolling surface of the North American log.

Rudel seems to have an affinity for natural substances or evoking natural occurrences that hold great personal significance. *Recrudesce* is one of his more direct and intimate usages of a substance: algae collected from the Los Angeles River. His concept, a dream in which the corpse of a man sprouted into a full Eden, spawned this ghostly head rising from a bed of vegetation. The form feels like a shadow or a fading reflection, its ephemeral nature apparent despite its solid, delicate form. The only better experience would be finding this head in an actual pool of water, completing the dream as a reality for viewers.

Each work in *burgeon* is unnaturally natural. It seems too familiar yet so strange within the confines of a modern-day gallery. And for some reason, it holds its weight. The curving, self-receding forms that first greet visitors in the gallery evoke a shared thought, a universal memory, for why would the shape of a snail shell rest on the pristine white walls of Jack Shainman if not emerging out of the collective consciousness of its audience? It is certainly difficult to find such earth-based works installed in the whitescape of an exhibition, but it tends to validate Rudel's process as not just a careless laud of nature but rather a deliberate displacement into the modern world.

The only point of contention lies in Rudel's insistent disregard for the technological age, to the extent that its absence becomes obvious and dated. The most recent source of inspiration seems to have been during George W. Bush's time in office in the aforementioned *Gog*. The rest of the works call to mind an earlier period—one feels sucked into a Hunter S. Thompson world a la *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* amidst Rudel's *Psychadelic Root* and *Proprietary Dream Mandala*. Their creations were so personal, however, that it is impossible to commend them to anything other than their stories and intended uses. The spiraling mandala of playing cards, for example, was based on a dream in which Rudel found this very artwork in a collector's home and plotted its plagiarism. His medium is a set of cards used for a full cycle before being discarded at a casino, imbuing them with what Rudel describes as "residual energy." After knowing this self-created legend, the viewer can think of

nothing else.

Rudel declares in one interview that he dislikes the use of pedestals and their implication of art objects. With this mentality, he crafts a spindly wooden table to present *Double Helix*, yet again displacing the viewer from a gallery setting. The Jack Shainman Gallery, known for its representation of artists from Africa, East Asia, and North America "with a tendency towards conceptual as well as politically and socially engaged artwork," holds Rudel in this tradition. His personal inspirations and not-so-current events add a caveat to the political assignation, but as a whole, he fits the bill, implying a knowledge and esteem for varying cultures most insistently. It is the gallery's responsibility to respond to such work with an appropriate space, questioning if the pristine white walls of Jack Shainman fit the bill for the sociopolitical, conceptual individual of the contemporary age.

Possibly the most successful tool for Rudel in terms of his messages' proliferation is the gallery's take away handout of Rudel's artist notes. In it lay the stories, profound decision-making, and personality of the artist. Not all pieces are included in this verbal legend, which allow for the viewer to play a part in the reception of the artwork. In the meantime, each story provides an additional entryway for the audience into Rudel's deeply conceived works. While some may find the explanations patronizing to the more adventurous gallery-goer, this critic found the notes exploratory with quite the venturesome attitude. Wall labels are nonexistent, forcing each viewer to pair a work with a story, an intuitive puzzle that both increases interest and sparks a connection between artwork, artist, and viewer.