Known for his lyrical drawings informed by physical movement, artist Robert Schatz has, in his latest body of work, begun to explore the third dimension. Using humble materials, such as twine and found pieces of wood, Schatz crafts intriguing objects that index his decision-making process. Beginning with no preconceived idea for form, the artist manipulates his materials intuitively, allowing their natural inclinations to manifest. In this way, the complex, self-contained "lines" that he creates could be interpreted as being a study in beginnings and ends—and multiple plot twists in between—dictated by the stuff at hand rather than imposed by the artist.

A range of analogous structures exist within the sphere of human cultural production: Melanesian navigation charts, the so-called coconut fiber string "spirit catcher" of Danger Island, and yipus, that ancient record-keeping system of loops and links from the Andes. The artist readily admits to a childhood fascination with scale-model ship building (including the intricate rigging)—and certainly the mast-like pendulum hanging from his ceiling surely hints at these. Concepts seem to convey-through length and "event"—not only the accounts of various messages, but also a miniaturation reproduction of the path the messenger took—in time and space—to arrive at delivery. These mysterious forms, which trade equally in contours and negative space, fit comfortably within the ongoing dialogue of modern and post-modern sculpture. Any artist engaging with suspended forms in motion must contend with the long shadow of Alexander Calder. The artist’s utilization of simple, everyday items acknowledges post-minimalist Richard Tuttle and his seemingly innocuous production. Like the mature ode of Fred Sandback, with acrylic yarn stretched in and around the viewer’s space, Schatz’s pieces employ three-dimensional string to heighten bodily experience. Philosophically they also correlate to David Smith’s abstract expressionist sculptor, with objects appearing to hover over the "inner necessity" of the forms, an unplanned irrational arrangement facilitated by the artist.

Schatz intends his sculpture as a response to the fast-paced, pixel-mediated, jet-set lifestyle of twenty-first century culture. Capitalizing on the similarity of his forms to the swirl of string in the back of the kitchen drawer, the artist aims to "entangle" the viewer, evoking curiosity and mental attempts to "untangle" the literal—and figurative—conundrum at hand. Given the artist’s interest in Eastern thought, the very present "thing"ness of specific objects of contemplation, like the scholar stones of Chinese tradition, also seems applicable here. Perhaps American modernist Georgia O’Keeffe summed it up best: “The [work of art] is like a thread that runs through all the reasons for the other things that make one’s life.” In his sculpture, Robert Schatz encourages us to reflect upon just that.

Cover: From left, What the Willows Tell Me, 2013-14, and cots (detail), 2014, created with just twine, alpaca yarn, rice, kozo paper, wood, and acrylic.

Jonathan Frederick Walz, curator of American art at the Sheldon Museum of Art, talked with Robert Schatz about his work and studio practice. Here are excerpts from their conversation.

JFW: Something that has consistently struck me about your work is the idea of anonymity or selflessness, that somehow your work is less about the modernist Western idea of imposing upon materials, often on a monumental scale, but that it is more about having a relationship with the paint or the twine. Things like gravity and resistance also come into play. Tell us more about your approach. Do you see it as timeless (somewhat) or timely? If so, how?

RPS: Yes, I do see my practice as more of a partnership with materials. Rauschenberg once said: "Now begin with the possibilities of the material and then let it do what it can do, so the artist is really almost a bystander…" Overall I would say that my practice is investigatory rather than "timely." I'm a tinkerer, and just as interested in process as in a well-resolved outcome. Of course I do have aesthetic intention, so my work is not entirely "selfless."

When crafting these pieces I allow the material to suggest my creative decisions. Those decisions are based on the structural conditions presented to me at any given moment. There is no plan worked out in advance, no prior sketching of ideas. These pieces evolve from an intuitive shape, something that seems interesting or promising, then building and engineering from that point forward. The process includes both addition and subtraction, and working out stresses and weight and compositional balance.

Because these sculptures are plays of physical line moving through space, they run smack into the "problems" of gravity, as you point out. They must be engineered to accommodate gravitational pull. That's an ongoing reality during every phase of their construction. Even at what may seem to be a final stage, a new condition might present itself and require a response from me. This can also occur during the post-construction period when a piece is set, so generally there's a long period of engagement with each piece.

Artistic scale is an interesting subject to address within the context of your question and in relation to the pieces in this show. The larger scale of modern and contemporary art that we've become accustomed to has been attributed to the abstract expressionists, who, it is said by some critics, created artwork that reflected the scale of America as a rejection of the easel painting of Europe, to state America’s claim as the heroic, new standard-bearer for Western art. Prior to that, monumentally scaled work was generally only found in public spaces, either civic or sacred, usually intended to celebrate the power of the state or the established religion.

JFW: One of the ideas I was interested in exploring in this project is that I have known you mostly for your works on paper, but you are an accomplished painter as well, and now you have begun working in a new mode: sculpture. Would you be willing to describe your journey among mediums? How did it come about that you switched from paint to string?

RPS: As an artist I feel it's incumbent on me to explore any avenue that triggers my curiosity, that might prove useful for expression. But for several years before this project was included in the exhibition two-dimensional; drawing, painting, printmaking, collage, digital imagery. Given my particular interests in line and structure, sculpture seems a logical step. I wouldn't say quite that I've "switched" from painting, so much as I've expanded my practice and found another genre to roll around in, especially since I still paint and often work between mediums simultaneously.

Robert Schatz, born in Allentown, Pennsylvania, earned his undergraduate degree at the University of Scranton. He later pursued post-baccalaureate studies in fine art at Massachusetts College of Art and The Art Institute of Boston. Institutions that have collected his work include the University of Scranton, Southern Methodist University, the University of Nebraska, the U.S. Department of State, and the Harvard University Art Museums. The artist lives and works in New York City.

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