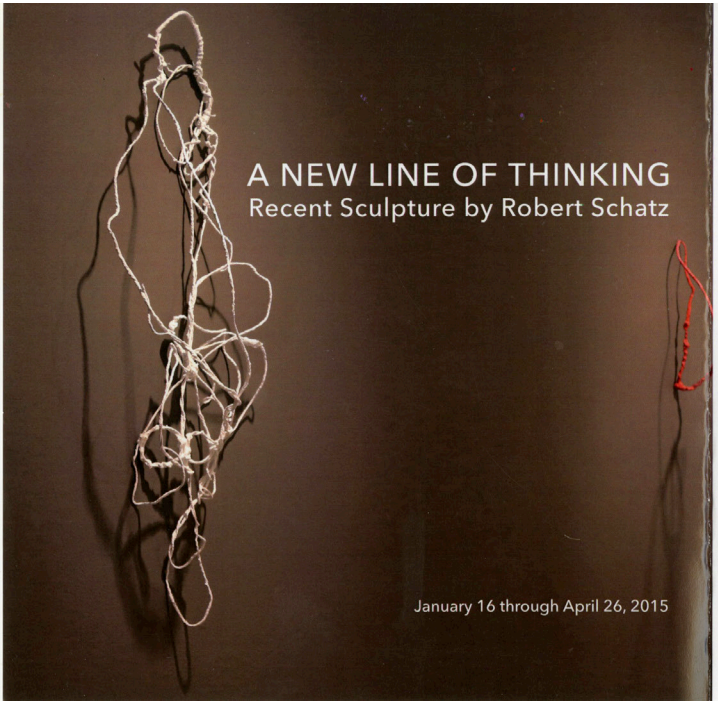


A NEW LINE OF THINKING

Recent Sculpture by Robert Schatz

January 16 through April 26, 2015

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 abstract narratives, with 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 catchers" of Danger Island, and *quipu*, 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 masculine-gendered activity of knot tying pertains here, too. These constructions seem to convey—through length and "event"—not only the accounts of various messages, but also a miniaturized 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 spaces, 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 oeuvre of Fred Sandback, with acrylic yarn stretched in and around the viewer's space, Schatz's pieces employ three-dimensional line to heighten bodily experience. Philosophically they also correlate to David Smith's abstract expressionist sculpture, welded together according to chance and 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 snarl of string in the back of the odd kitchen drawer, the artist aims to "entangle" the viewer, evoking curiosity and mental attempts to "unravel" 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 Wildflowers Tell Me*, 2013-14, and *Lotus* (detail), 2014, created with jute twine, alphatic resin, 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 will upon materials, often on a monumental scale, but that it is more about having a partnership 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 (somehow) or timely? If so, how?

RPS: Yes, I do see my practice as more of a partnership with materials. Rauschenberg once said: "You 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 "willful," 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 initial 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 "problem" 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 might 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 settling, 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 stake 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.

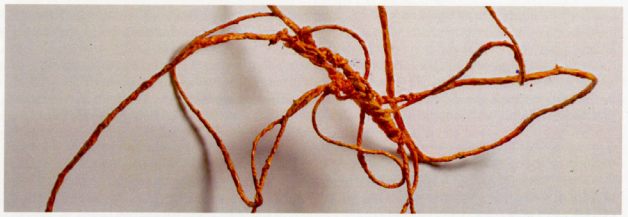
Twine and paper subvert the idea of a "heroic" monumental material. The monumental still has its place of course—one thinks of Anish Kapoor and his intent to trigger experience of the Sublime through large scale. But as an artist I am interested in what might be called the Intimate Sublime, in subtlety and quiet grace. I believe that an experience of the Sublime can occur along the whole the spectrum of scale. After all, we know now that the microcosm stretches just as much to one side of us as the macrocosm does on the other. My work evokes a gentler, more mindful experience, at best one that expresses playfulness, delight, fragility, and even tenderness—those aspects of our humanity that our competitive society tends to underplay. In this way, my work can be said to be timely because it proposes alternatives to the current paradigms.

JFW: Something that has come up for both of us in discussing your work is the idea of "scholar stones," which are intentionally weathered rocks, frequently created within Asian monastic traditions. Could you talk about your interest in Buddhism and Eastern thought more generally? What relationship do you see between your current three-dimensional work and "scholar stones?"

RPS: My own work and scholar stones share common philosophical ground, and even occasionally a similarity of form and visual disposition despite their obvious differences in material, mass and orientation. Among other things, scholar stones were prized for their eccentric, asymmetrical, and whimsical forms, and their play of negative and positive space. These qualities derive from Taoism and Zen, both of which, as mentioned earlier, have been influences on my practice.

Scholar stones (also called "viewing stones") were collected by the educated bureaucratic class of pre-modern China. They symbolized the wild mountain landscape that, to the scholarly mind, represented an ideal state of living in semi-solitude away from the fractious affairs of human society, contemplating the sublimity of Nature. Although the scholars who collected these stones operated within the Confucian system of law and ethics, the stones themselves need to be seen against the backdrop of Taoist thought, which regarded Nature as manifestation and signifier of metaphysical realities. Water was a key symbol in Taoism and so these stones were also valued because their forms were often the result of the action of water.

After Buddhism was introduced into China, aspects of Taoist philosophy came to be integrated with it and produced an indigenous school called Chan Buddhism. Chan is probably more familiar to Westerners in its Japanese form, Zen. Zen monasteries in Japan feature the rock gardens, where they served as focal points for meditation. These rock gardens exemplify a Zen-derived aesthetic concept called *wabi sabi*—the idea that beauty is found in spareness and simplicity, emptiness, silence, in natural materials, in economy of means. In America, this aesthetic has influenced the Northwest School and John Cage, and indirectly Frank Lloyd Wright.



I was actually predisposed to these Asian philosophies because of an earlier interest in the American Transcendentalists—Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman especially—who I was exposed to in high school. Even though Transcendentalism derived in part from Eastern philosophy, it wasn't influenced directly by Taoism or Zen. But there are areas of commonality. I've been attracted to all these schools of thought because they express a profound regard for the natural world, an appreciation for both the beauty and the transience of the physical world, and in that light also offer perspective on our own humanity.

JFW: Scale plays an important role in your paintings, drawings, and sculpture. There is a long tradition of monumental sculpture at Sheldon, particularly evident in the museum's renowned sculpture garden. Local community members have access to oversize creations, like Richard Serra's *Greenpoint* and Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's *Torn Notebook*. Your work operates in a different realm…

RPS: Yes, the work in this exhibit exists intentionally at a considerably more intimate scale than the specific pieces you mention, as well as much contemporary art in general. I remember seeing Miro's *Constellations* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and being completely fascinated by the vastness of their world despite their small scale.

I like that juxtaposition of something small evoking a large range of meaning and reference. In this way the emotional, imaginative, and conceptual, in other words the inner response (which is primary), occupies more space than the object itself (which is secondary), and is in fact potentially infinite. The ship models I built as a boy taught me that a whole world could be evoked by a small-scale object. Smaller scale also implies accessibility to me, a certain level of individual humanity, something akin to a personal memento triggering vast fields of emotion or thought.

Left: *Dunmore* (detail), 2014, jute twine, alphatic resin, kozo paper, wood, and acrylic

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 media? 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 until a few years ago my practice was indeed only two-dimensional: drawing, painting, printmaking, collage, digital imagery. Given my particular interests in line and structure, sculpture seems a logical step. I wouldn't quite say 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 U.S. Department of State, and the Harvard University Art Museums. The artist lives and works in New York City.

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