The Artist Program:
Robert Schatz

22 MARCH - 25 MAY 2018

STRING THEORY

DEBORAH BERKE PARTNERS

Artist Statement: String Theory

Manipulating humble materials intuitively and without preconceived composition, I build playfully enigmatic structures that perform like three-dimensional drawings moving through space in organic yet architectural ways. They serve, in their own fashion, as objects of meditation, partnering with their cast shadows to create a dance of form and non-form, evoking thoughts of Plato's cave.

String Theory consists of recent sculpture complemented by a selection of related paintings on paper. With philosophical affinities to traditional Chinese and Japanese art and urban graffiti, these works express my interest in line, dynamic structure, and kinetic space. They explore what the philosopher Alan Watts refers to as the "wiggliness of reality."

The sculptures are accompanied by paintings on paper, where brushwork suggests an unseen movement beyond the boundaries of the edge and hints at deeper realities behind surface appearances.

JUTE TWINE, CANE, PAPER, GLUE, ACRYLIC MEDIUM, PAINT, KOZO AND KRAFT PAPERS, WOOD, MODROC, PLASTER

The Work: Objects

Q: How has line been a muse in your work?

A: I've had a love affair with line for most of my working life as an artist, as a draughtsman, and as a painter, and now as a maker of three-dimensional pieces. Line serves several functions for me in the pursuit of my aesthetic aims, primarily in the way it records gesture and movement (and so abstractly signifies the body), and in the way it creates space and structure. I'm very interested in how human societies organize their pictorial space, and also in how line by itself can create pictorial space in what otherwise would be a flat, two-dimensional plane. In my three-dimensional work I explore how line can enliven physical space. And of course line is not just a tool for spatial composition or the delineation of form. It's also a potent vehicle for expression—it possesses an inherent poetry and emotional weight. There's also a sensuality to line that for me is somewhat reminiscent of an idle caress.

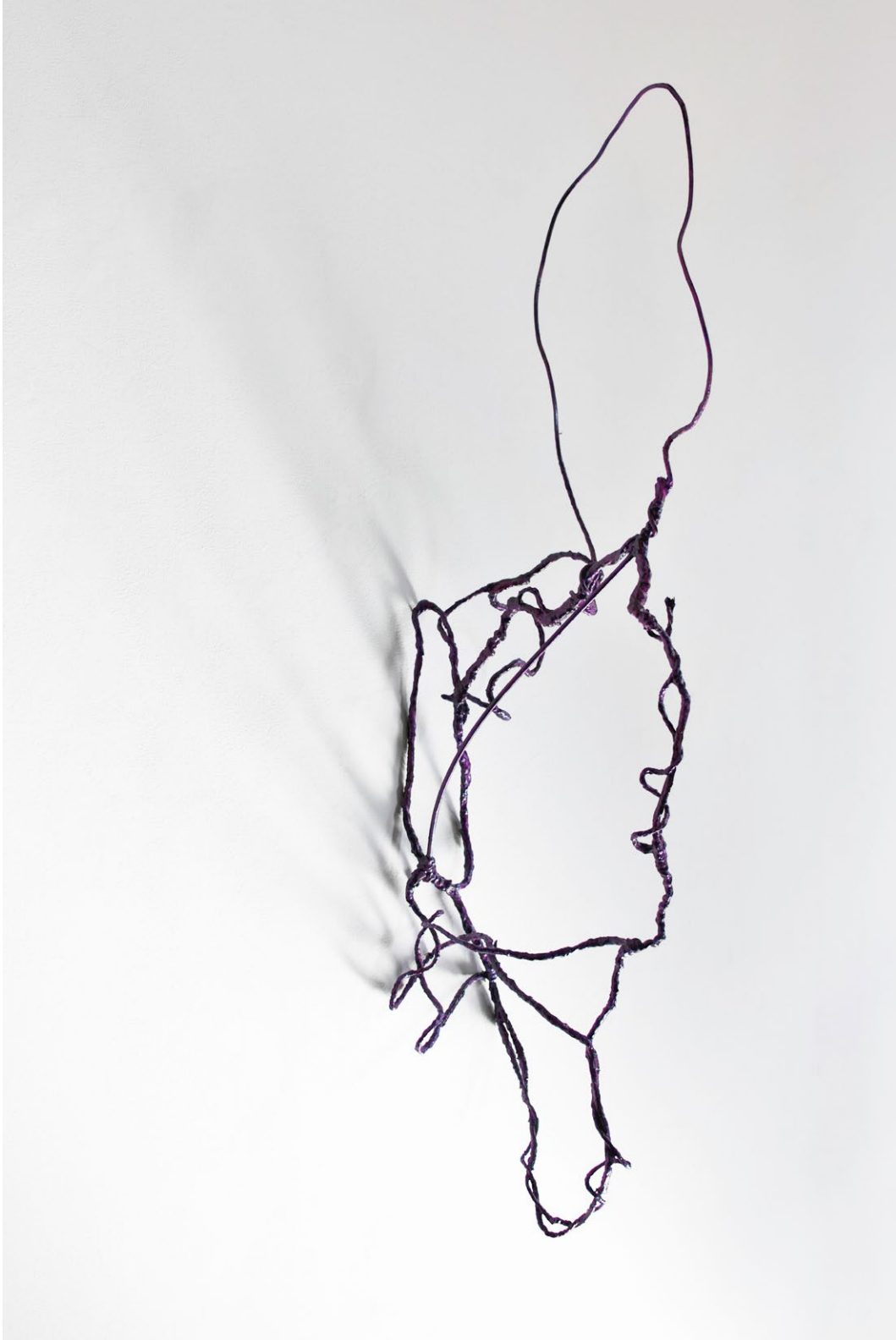
For a long time now I've been interested in the concept first articulated by Heraclitus: Everything, in both our perceived reality and in the invisible reality, is in motion (expressed by the classical Greek phrase *panta rhei*, "everything flows"). For me, line has been the best way to express this reality because it so readily conveys movement, especially when it serves as a record of physical gesture.

When I think of line operating in three-dimensional space, I think primarily of structure. I'm reminded of those Marshall Island navigational charts made from coconut palm ribs—linear constructions, which mapped islands and ocean currents, providing navigational directions to and from those islands. My own three-dimensional work is not utilitarian in this way, but my work shares aesthetic and conceptual affinities with these navigational charts: The similarity of materials; in being structures composed of lines; in the use of line to map conceptual and visual paths.

Lines of course, do not exist in nature. They are abstractions we have created. In geometry and mathematics, line is defined as having no end points, and so is infinite, extending endlessly through the Universe. I find that concept incredibly exciting, and it's one of the themes of my two-dimensional work.

Q: In String Theory, what is the role of the viewer?

A: An artist obviously can't control how viewers engage, but I would like to trigger a sense of play or whimsy; a curiosity—and at best—a kind of mythic feeling. So a viewer's first response would spring from a sense of poetry, so to speak. And yes, since my three-dimensional pieces



extend away from the wall into physical space, they are to be circumnavigated and viewed from multiple angles. The relationships between their linear elements change as a viewer moves around them.

I want the viewer to find a dialogue between shapes, curves, angles, axes of symmetry, as well as between cast shadows and physical structure. The open spaces of the sculptures also allow a kind of visual flight through the pieces, something I liken to flying among a bank of clouds. This moving through is also true in the paintings exhibited here. The viewer is looking through the white picture plane into a world beyond it. The painted area functions as window, in the same way that historical wall-paintings (murals) once functioned as windows onto other worlds, dissolving the physical plane of the wall.

Q: How does space affect the installation?

A: The parameters of the setting always determine the relationship of each piece to the others, and also each individual piece to the space itself. In other words: Where will a piece best live? How much space does it need? How will it activate the space around it? With which other pieces is there neighborly discourse? How will the lighting cast shadows? How do those shadows add structure and dialogue? All these questions/conditions come into play.

Q: What meaning do you find in titles?

A: Some of my titles are rather straightforward, but others are "crafted." I keep lists of words or names that I find interesting, which I then write scrambled variations of. I draw on many sources as inspiration: Gaelic place names, Hawaiian star names, words from other languages, references from myth and literature. *Okulea*, for example, is derived from both the Hawaiian name for the star Arcturus, and from oculus. With *Pequod* and *Argo*, I reference fictional ships from Western literature as they evoke the symbolic quality of "ship" as well as the symbolic qualities of those particular ships. Though, I would not want their titles to limit the meanings of those pieces.

Titles are akin to personal names; they reflect a unique personality. There is ambiguity with our names. They are arbitrary sounds without current meaning (Smiths are probably not blacksmiths, for example), but they hold meaning because they identify an individual—the words mean the individual. And so it is with the titles of my pieces. They are specific, but also ambiguous and multivalent in their meanings.

Q: What is the significance of physicality in your work?

A: I've already mentioned how, early in my career, through a study of Chinese calligraphy, I was exposed to the idea that line and gestural marking can signify the human body. This concept of embodiment is a fundamental aspect of my two-dimensional work, which is created through physical gesture and the movement of the brush or my hand around the picture plane. When it comes to my three-dimensional work, the structures are emblematic of the body in that their lines and forms stand in for us as bodies moving through space. But, their physicality also elicits a physical response in the viewer. The movement of the eye, or the movement around the piece. The work generates motion, a kind of dance, on the part of the viewer: It's interesting to note here that the Sheldon Museum commissioned a dance piece for my 2015 exhibition there, and it was performed in the gallery where the exhibit was held.

PP. 1, 3, AND ABOVE: ARGO

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I'm currently pursuing the same lines of inquiry, but with simplified forms. I need to explore a more minimal, almost quieter form, where shadows play a more conscious, less accidental, role. The current pieces in process are primarily circular or ovoid, projecting outward less than their predecessors. They still move away from the wall however, and so create cast shadows that serve as additional arcs. These form nearly complete circles out of some of the pieces. With the shadows acting this way, I'm reminded of Cezanne's drawing of apples, where he goes round and round with his line, looking for the one that will describe the form of the apple most perfectly. *Atome* in this exhibition is a hint of the direction the work is moving in.

OPPOSITE (L TO R): OKULEA, PEQUOD, HOOPER; ABOVE: PEQUOD

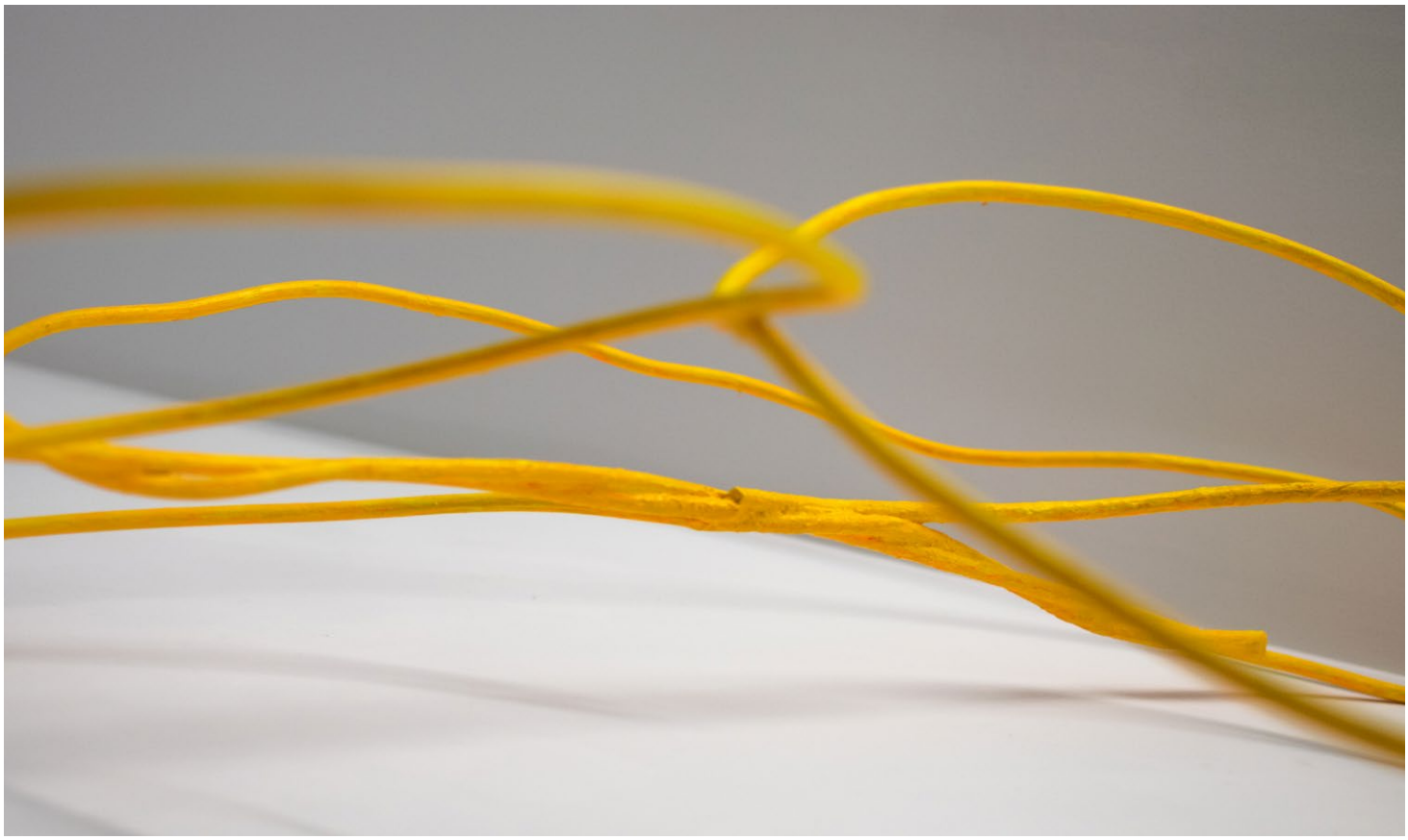
ABOVE: HOOPER

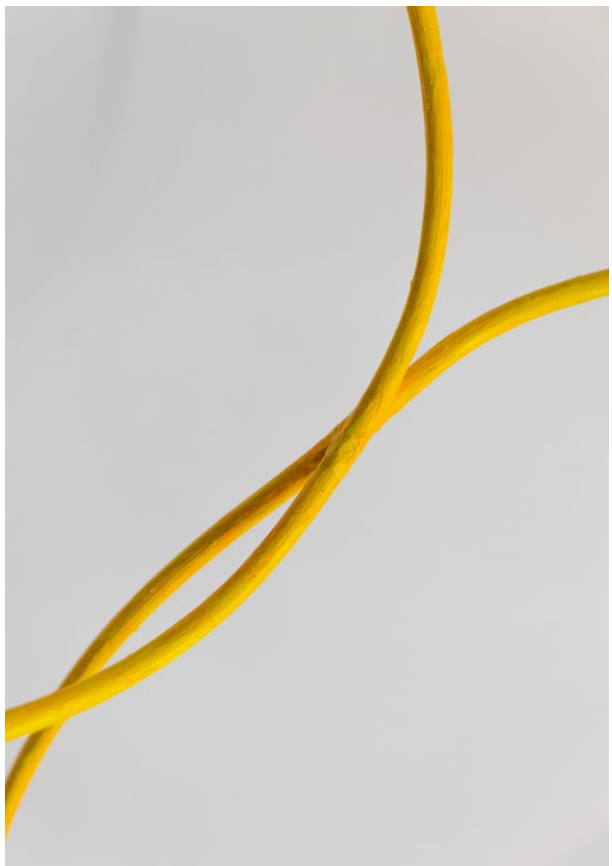
OPPOSITE: OKULEA

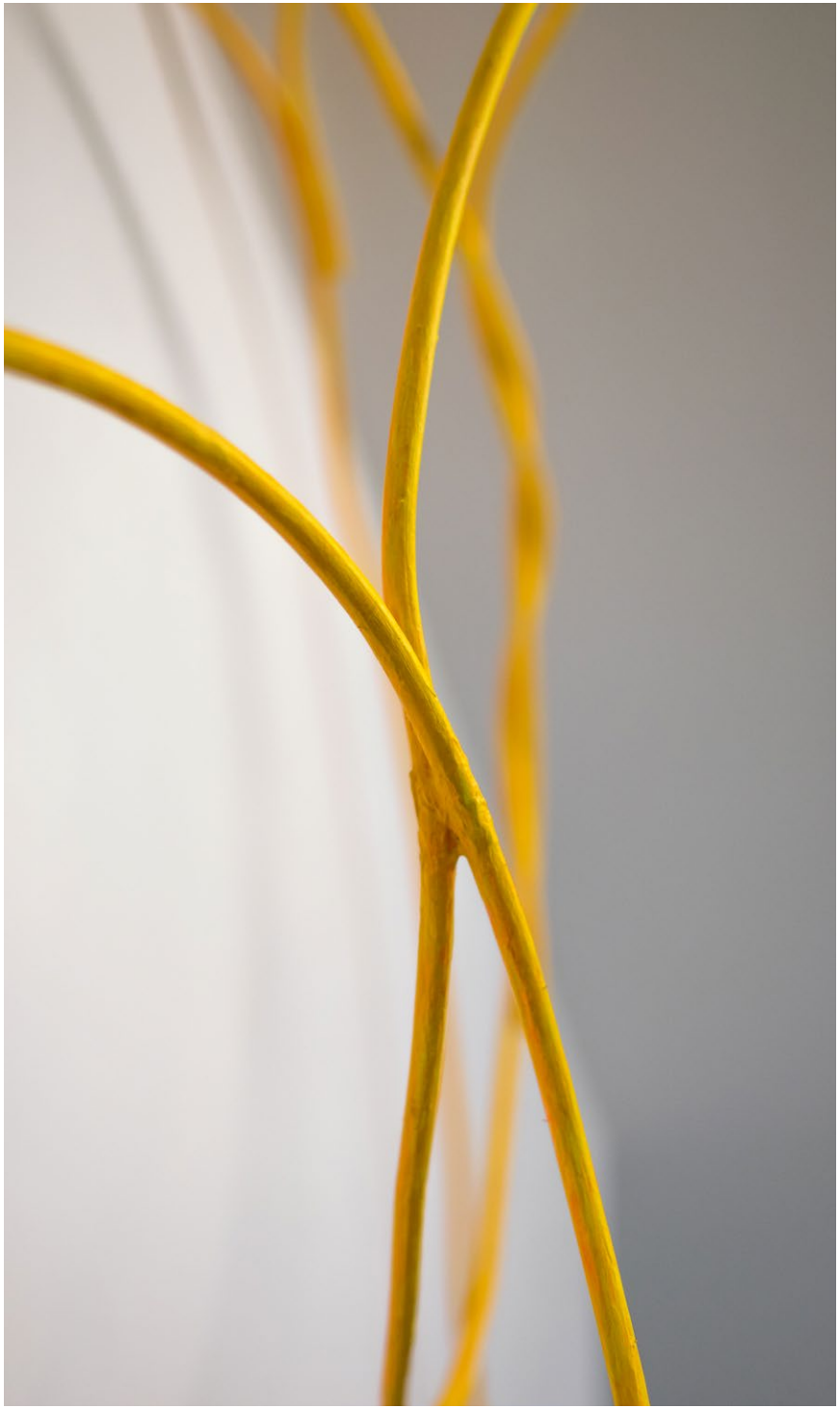
OPPOSITE: DUNMORE

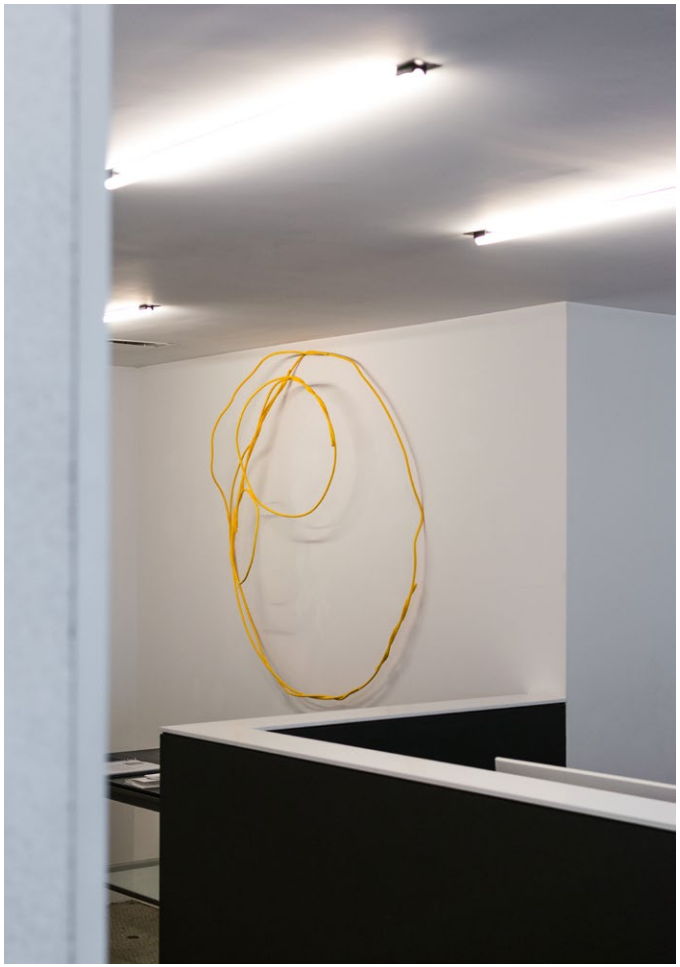
ABOVE: SMALL STRUCTURES, NOS. 1-8 (AFTER BRICE)

ABOVE: LIVINGSTON









ABOVE: ATOME

The Work: Studies on Paper

Q: What are some of your primary influences?

A: My influences has been primarily philosophical rather than stylistic. I was first introduced to Taoism and Zen in an art history class, and they resonated with me very profoundly. Their principles reinforced an already existing disposition in me that valued nature as a source of esthetic inspiration; not nature that is visible, but rather its processes. (One thinks of Chinese scholar stones, which were crafted by water and admired for the resultant shapes.) Using nature as a model, one allows the life of a work to emerge rather than to be forced; to engage in a partnership with materials, not just utilize them as tools of will. When approaching materials this way, especially organic materials like twine and wood, there is a "call and response" rather than an imposition based on a preconceived agenda. Taoism and Zen also taught me to accept so-called "happy accidents" during the creation process, to understand both the beauty in transience (echoing Heraclitus), and that life is a dialogue between opposites. These themes became conceptual underpinnings for my work. I was also introduced to the idea of simplicity of means, to imbue the least with the most. This concept has informed my choice of materials for my three-dimensional work.

And interestingly, I came to a deeper understanding of abstraction through Asian aesthetics. A few years after moving to New York in the late '80s, I purchased the book *The Chinese Art of Writing* from a sidewalk vendor (at that time you could find the most interesting books for sale on the sidewalks). The author's overarching premise was that calligraphy serves not only to communicate language or idea, but also bodily movement; that it is an abstract presentation of human form because it embodies movement, stance, and posture. A trained eye reads the flow and weight of a character on a scroll and knows, feels exactly the calligrapher's posture when the mark was made. Because my artistic training was initially centered on drawing and painting from the figure, I was already accustomed to thinking of gestural line as a tool for figurative representation. The premise of the book showed me that physical presence could be communicated abstractly. It wasn't necessary to depict a figure. This was my first exposure to the idea that line and gestural marking could be a form of embodiment.

Q: What about your shift from 2-D to 3-D?

A: My transition from a practice centered entirely on pictorial work to one that

UNTITLED

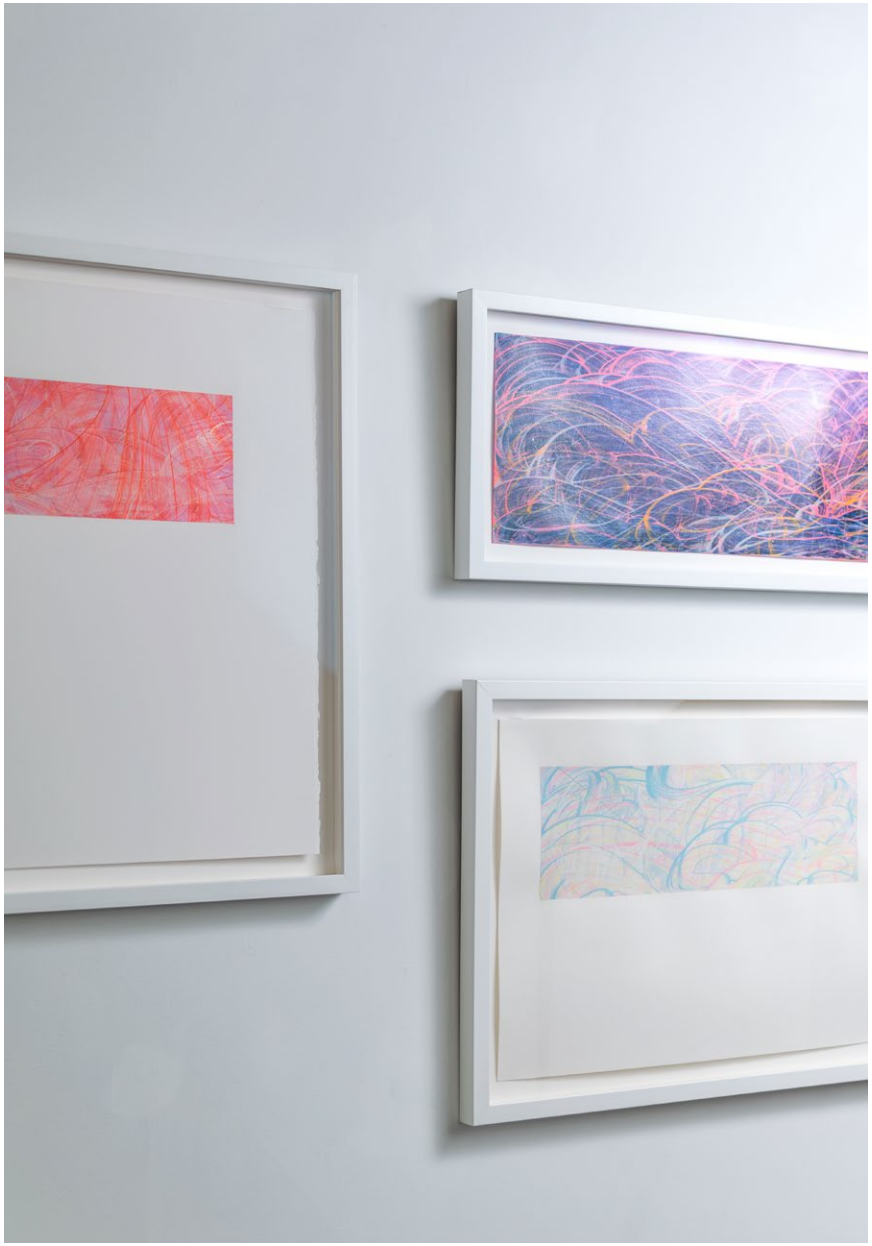
incorporates three-dimensional work began about ten years ago. The prompt was my series of paintings on music paper. Although these paintings were abstract, they were very evocative of landscape because my process created a more traditional, pre-Cubist space; in other words, somewhat illusionistic, and quite unlike the flat, all-over pictorial space that was championed by Post-War abstraction. I was intrigued by the space in these paintings and they prompted a leap into actual three dimensions. I began experimenting with open, linear constructions made of narrow strips of paper held together by folds, each strip acting as the equivalent of a painted or drawn gesture. Over time, I began to experiment with twine and wood.

My interest in making three-dimensional work also goes back to my boyhood and teenage years. I built models of rigged sailing ships and buildings (some from plastic kits, others out of paper and cardboard). I had a large set of building blocks; not the square kind, but a "post and beam" rectangular type, which I used to build fenestrated, multi-story structures. All in all, I acquired an understanding of engineering and weight, and how elements work in concert to reinforce each other (learning how to rig a nautical model was a big teacher that way). I also learned that structures could have an imaginal life. (And that's precisely the way art operates.) In light of all that, the transition to three-dimensional work in my studio practice is not all that radical.

The discoveries that have accompanied the shift have been practical, in that I've gained working knowledge of new materials; aesthetic, in that I've found poetic possibilities in these materials; psychological, in that creating with these materials requires me to be more patient.

STUDY 1603

STUDY 1303



OPPOSITE: UNTITLED; ABOVE (CLOCKWISE): STUDY 1603, UNTITLED, STUDY 1304

The Program: Installed

Q: How did you approach presenting your work in our studio?

A: To help visualize how pieces might hang in the actual space, I made a scale mock-up to work out possibilities. So when the time came for the installation, I already had a good sense of where different pieces might live.

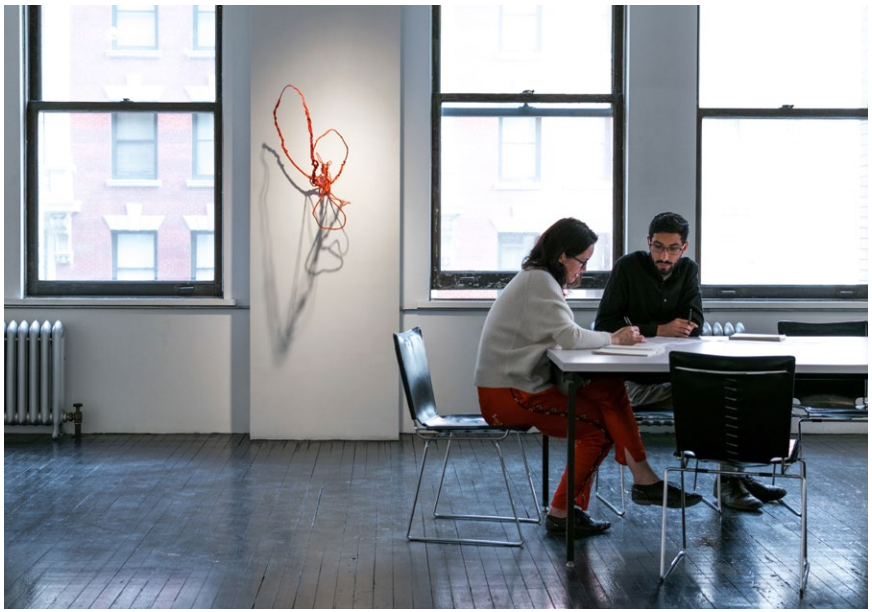
Of course, as expected, some adjustments were necessary as new conditions presented themselves, such as the ambient and directed light, and the flow of foot traffic. Some of the questions I had asked myself prior to installation were: how would the two- and three-dimensional pieces relate to each other in the main space and also speak across the whole space? And if using the window walls, which pieces would occupy those walls best and relate with the views out the windows?

So for example, I installed one of the works on paper on the southern wall between two windows. I made that choice because I like how the gestural curves in that piece complement the angular geometry of the architecture seen across the street, but also how those curves will echo the tree line of Madison Square Park when the trees leaf out.

Q: What is appealing about showing outside of a formal gallery context?

A: Traditional gallery spaces, whether commercial or museum or university, are not "lived-in" spaces, they are by nature more hermetic. (Good for contemplating art, of course, but in a way that separates art from daily life.)

The appeal of the space at Deborah Berke Partners is, for me, twofold: it fulfills the need for a dedicated space for thoughtful viewing of the art on exhibit, while at the same time keeping the art within the daily working life of the firm. There's the opportunity for the work to live in a place of human activity and become part of that activity. I also feel that the spatial and structural themes of my work seem especially relevant in the setting of an architectural office.



The Artist

Robert Schatz was born in 1958 in Allentown, Pennsylvania. His work has been exhibited over the past two decades in Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, France, Germany, the UK, as well as the United States. Museum venues have included: The Noyes Museum of Art of Stockton University, Sheldon Museum of Art, Sofia Art Gallery (Sofia, Bulgaria), Landesmuseum Oberösterreich (Linz, Austria), and the Derby Museum (Derby, UK). Gallery and project venues have included The Phatory LLC, Nicholas Davies Gallery, and The Painting Center, Curious Matter and Art House, The Institute for American Art, Pluto, Exile (Berlin), Gallery Pixi, and the South London Gallery. University and college venues have included Southern Methodist University, University of Scranton, Cedar Crest College, Marymount Manhattan College, and the University of Strathclyde. His art is in the permanent collections of the Harvard Art Museums, Sheldon Museum, the US State Department, Southern Methodist University, University of Scranton, Pfizer, and the JBG Companies, as well as in many private collections in the United States, Canada, and Europe. He has also provided album artwork to the indie band Vovete.

As a young man Schatz studied at the Baum School of Art in Allentown. He earned a bachelor of arts degree magna cum laude in history and philosophy at the University of Scranton, then continued his fine art studies at Massachusetts College of Art and The Art Institute of Boston. He currently lives and works in New York, and from time-to-time has been heard playing the Appalachian dulcimer.

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The Artist Program

At Deborah Berke Partners, we believe architecture is a discipline that exists within an expanse of cultural and social fields. In our work, we often blur disciplinary boundaries, layer unusual programs, and borrow from related and disparate disciplines. It is our belief that architecture and design are not removed from life, but are embedded in the activities and rituals of the everyday.

For more than twenty years, starting in our original location at 211 West 19th Street, we have hosted exhibitions in our studio to support artists. The relationship is symbiotic. We provide a platform for the artists; their creativity enhances our studio environment. In many occasions, the Artist Program leads to future collaborations and referrals. In parallel, we also host talks and events for writers, performing artists, academics, and critics. All these voices enliven our practice and enrich our work.

DEBORAH
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