

MARK PORTER IN CONVERSATION WITH ROSEMARIE FIORE

Visual artist Rosemarie Fiore has been kind enough to share works from her *Evel Knievel Pinball Painting* series in *Skillshot*. Based in Bronx, NY but represented by Von Lintel Gallery, Los Angeles, Fiore has for years created works of art by manipulating popular technology such as waffle irons, fireworks and amusement park rides. Rosemarie and I agreed that an interview via email would be pretty fun:

Mark Porter: I'd like to start off by saying that I've been a fan of your work for several years, it's really exciting to have the opportunity to showcase your work in *Skillshot*.

When viewing your work I imagine you in the moment of your creative process. As I understand it, in order to create the *Firework Drawings* and *Smoke Paintings*, you constructed machines that allowed you to direct the smoke emitted by fireworks onto either canvas or paper. The result is stunning, the works look both chaotic and controlled, they also seem organic and at the same time industrial. In the same sense, in 2004 you created an amazing series of 60 x 60 foot drawings with a machine called the *Good-Time Mix Machine* by converting amusement park ride into a giant spirograph-painting machine.

When creating your pieces, when does the art making process officially start, when does it stop?

Rosemarie Fiore: Artists are inventors by nature. I believe that for us, the art making process begins when the seed of an idea for a visual work is recognized.

Because of this, I feel that it's important to be open to life's occurrences and experiences. Often an idea is born out of being present in the moment and noticing your environment. In my case, ideas develop as a result of a chance visceral experience I've had involving a random mechanism's motion and movement.

An example of such an idea which led to an important project is the *Good-Time Mix Machine: Scrambler Paintings* (2004), an Eli Bridge Scrambler amusement park ride that was converted into a massive painting machine. I came up with the idea a few years earlier during a ride on a Scrambler at Six Flag's King Dominion in Virginia. As I spun around, I realized that the ride turned in a predictable pattern. That is, the curve it generates is hypocycloidal. The motion of the ride is that of a circle that moves by rolling internally inside the circumference of a larger circle. A simple children's Spirograph toy acts in a similar fashion. In essence, what I saw was that this ride had the potential to be transformed into a large Spirograph painting machine. Recognizing the ride's creative promise, I immediately jotted down the idea in my sketchbook and I began to consider this possibility. I imagined markers and brushes attached to the bottom of the ride's seats recording the hidden patterns it made when in motion.

A few years later, I was given the opportunity to present the idea to Grand Arts in Kansas City who decided to collaborate with me to fund and realize the project. Working with their team, we refined and developed my initial idea by creating a simple paint delivery system prototype, choosing substrate materials appropriate to the installation sites, selecting paint colors that reflected the primary colors painted on the ride itself



Evel Knievel Pinball Paintings, 2001

Evel Knievel pinball machine, oil on vellum, vintage pinball glass



Process documentation for Good-Time Mix Machine: Scrambler Drawings, 2004

1964 Eli Bridge Scrambler ride, generator, compressor, bucket, acrylic paint on vinyl, video camera 60 ft x 60 ft

and formulating an exact process of painting that harmonized with the ride's movements. Once we figured out the technical details, we spent a few months painting with the ride ultimately creating a series of large 48 x 48 ft and 60 x 60 ft works on vinyl and canvas.

After developing a tool, defining a new painting process and executing the work, the art-making component of a project does not just end with an exhibition or performance. Rather, I am interested in re-examining the motions of earlier painting tools by revisiting their movements through the development of new painting tools. Because of this, I look at my work as one unified, connected creative process that is always expanding but is cyclical in nature.

MP: Is there a separation between the process you use to create your works and the works themselves?

RF: Yes, most definitely. I view my creative experience as consisting of two parts.

The first consists of developing and executing an idea. This part expresses itself similarly for each project. It involves a lot of research, experimentation, examination, and trouble-shooting. I explore every option, including many that lead to dead ends. With luck, my efforts lead to developing and refining a performative painting process specific to the tool and idea. Sometimes I perform in front of an audience, but mostly, the process is a private, personal experience that occurs in my studio or production space. I coordinate my movements with the motion of the mechanized painting tool. Therefore, the painting process and my experience changes according to which tool I am using at the moment.

The second part of my creative experience is about the finished works themselves and how I connect to them. They are time-lapse accounts of my painting process. I've described them as records or documents of the painting process. But really they are these complex kinematic maps. They speak strongly to me. It's satisfying to see how much they transform when on view when they are removed from their original production context.

MP: Why do you choose to construct your own tools and/or use machines to create your works, rather than relying on more traditional methods?

RF: Early in my career, I was interested in studying and recording the motions and hidden kinematic patterning of found popular technology that everyone had a connection to such as the spin of an amusement park ride, the turn of a lawn mower blade, the wipe of a car's windshield wiper and the trajectory of a pinball. When I decided to paint with a certain machine, I chose to minimally transform the machine and to not drastically alter the machine itself or its movement and motion. I didn't add a gear, electronics or extra parts nor did I combine parts to 'improve' its spinning or performance. These alterations would have changed the essence of the machine thereby altering the dynamics of my relationship with it. I was interested in painting in collaboration with the machine's designers and engineers. As a result, I found myself discovering, working and creating within a predetermined structure in which I had limited flexibility.

During the same period, I began working with color smoke from smoke bomb fireworks. I controlled the smoke by igniting the fireworks in cans allowing the pressure created to squeeze the

color smoke out of the container. I was able to explore and manipulate a vast number of marks as I directed the smoke down onto paper. After working with cans as tools for over 10 years, I began thinking about making different marks by expanding my repertoire of smoke tools. Since I cannot go to the local art store and buy anything there that would remotely act as a painting tool for my Smoke Painting, I often refer back to European pyrotechnic history for answers. My research led me to focus on the Green Man who was an important part of Medieval pageant processions and was always documented carrying a 'Fire Stick', a long stick with a bundle of lit pyrotechnic devices tied to the end. I realized that I could create my own 'Fire Club' inspired smoke painting tool with just a broomstick, color smoke canisters and duct tape. This experimental 'Fire Club' tool led to my creating an ongoing series of rolling and handheld smoke painting tools. The advantage of creating my own tools is that I can change, alter and re-form them at will to create a mark or movement I desire. Making my own tools allows me to enter much deeper into the process and my work.

MP: In 1977 Bally manufactured a pinball machine dedicated to Evel Knievel, a stunt performer who attempted more than 75 ramp-to-ramp motorcycle jumps in front of huge audiences in the 60's and 70's. I think of Evel Knievel as someone who liked to put on a spectacle, a showman, even an underdog. He was a bit of a pioneer in the sense that he pushed machines, cars to their potential breaking point, asking them to do things they weren't designed to do and he was along for the ride. His performances were the epitome of man vs machine. I actually just read that he's in the Guinness Book of World Records as being the survivor of

"most broken bones in a lifetime" at 433 fractures. That statistic makes me think of all the *Evel Knievel* pinball machines that are out there, still functioning, having survived many years of abuse. The machine is almost entirely red white and blue, adorned with stars, much like the caped, super-hero like costumes Evel wore during his stunts. To create the works in your *Evel Knievel Pinball Paintings* series, you chose red and blue paint to create your drawings with.

Can you describe your process for making this series, what was your process and why you chose that particular machine?

RF: The *Evel Knievel Pinball Painting* series was originally produced for an exhibition in St. Paul, MN and was funded by Midway Contemporary Gallery. When I first decided to transform a pinball machine into a painting machine, I spent many months considering which machine to choose. Right away, I was drawn to the older ones from my childhood. *Wonder Woman*, *Gilligan's Island*, *Taxi*, *Superman*, *Flash*, *Kiss*, *The Black Hole*, *Star Trek* all reminded me of a time when my brother and I would ride our bikes to the arcade and play games for hours on end. I had played a lot of pinball, but at the time never considered how the machine would function as a painting tool.

My first step was to research the idea. I focused on becoming acquainted with the various parts of the machine and studied how it could be taken apart in order to insert a canvas onto the playfield. I made trips to local arcades in NYC, met with gamers and studied the machines up close. I immediately noticed that the games which featured 2 or 3 playboard levels were not a good option because the resulting image would be spread out over multiple

canvases, broken up and too difficult to read. That eliminated some of my favorite machines such as *Gilligan's Island*. As I continued my visits to various pinball arcades, I became interested in the games that featured old school bell sounds and clicks and not electronic sounds. It's while playing these machines (Electro-Mechanical) that the rolling of the pinball, the flipper clicks and the bumper bounces can be heard because they are not drowned out by electronic noises. The sound produced was simple, harmonious and beautiful. I could see myself painting to this soundtrack. My search was narrowed down quite a bit to around the late 1970's because after that, machines featuring electronic sounds and components (Solid State) took over.

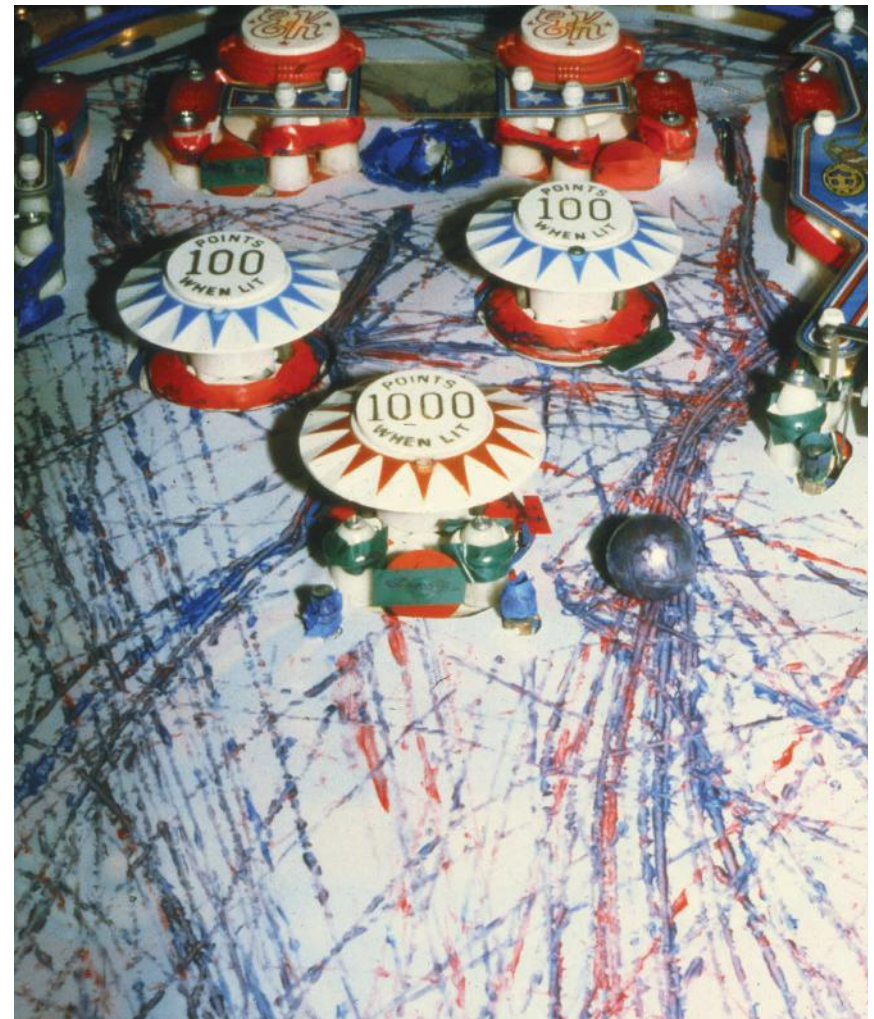
The machines I was interested in were all very similar in design. It was the theme for each machine that varied greatly. I was immediately drawn to Evel Knievel although it took a while to track one down that was for sale. Evel Knievel was someone I admired as a kid. I remember watching footage of his famous jumps on TV thinking he was some kind of real life superhero. In my mind, there was no way he would not make his jump and if he didn't, he would get up and try again in the future. Politics aside, he was a pretty amazing role model for a young kid. What I learned as an adult was that sometimes the physics for his jumps just wasn't there. Such was the case in his Snake Canyon jump. In fact, there was no way on earth that he would make the jump. In trial run after trial run, his trajectory failed to reach the desired distance. Yet, he tried anyway as if he didn't care how many bones he might break. Some might think he had a death wish, but I look at his attempts differently. As humans and artists for that matter, we continuously strive for

the remarkable and unattainable. There is something quite poetic about this and I could relate to it. So I ended up using Bally's *Evel Knievel* machine as my chosen painting tool.

My machine came with a manual which I followed taking the simple steps to remove the glass allowing room for the cut vellum to be fitted to the playfield. If you look at the paintings, you can see where the bumpers and flippers were because of the holes left in the vellum canvas. To create a painting, I played one three-pinball game. I coated each pinball with oil paint colors chosen from the colors of the machine itself, the colors that Evel Knievel was known for. One pinball was painted white, one red and one blue. I played each pinball as long as I could. The order I played each different color pinball and the length of time I played greatly affected the color of the paintings. Some games were longer, some were shorter and I found that the longer I played, the more lavender the painting became. Once the game was finished, I removed the painting and inserted a new vellum canvas into the playfield. In this way, I created a series of paintings. When exhibited, the paintings are hung behind vintage pinball glass. If you look at the glass closely, you can still see some scratches and scratchitti left on the glass by a bored teenager.

MP: What exciting and new projects do you have in store for the world?

RF: In my studio, I've been interested in creating painting tools that tumble. This Summer I'm spending a few months in Roswell, NM developing work for a performance that's taking place this July at The Fields Sculpture Park at OMI in upstate New York. The performance series is titled *"In Plain Air"* and the artists involved will be 'performing' painting. In New Mexico



Process documentation for Evel Knievel Pinball Paintings, 2001
Evel Knievel pinball machine, oil on vellum, vintage pinball glass

and in my studio in the Bronx, I've been developing painting tools that are based on the movement and structure of tumbleweeds. The painting tools are spherical in form and are comprised of wood, resin clay, Styrofoam and found objects such as brushes, rollers and sponges. Each tool has a series of canvas sails sewn into the structure that enables it to capture wind to roll and wander across the canvas. The

performance is about moving these tumbling tools that are dipped in black house paint across a 30 x 40 foot canvas using leaf blowers and a ramp. I've sent a few actual tumbleweeds back to New York from Roswell and if they arrive in one piece, I hope to use them in the performance as well.