

I met James Sterling Pitt at the Ping Pong Gallery to discuss his show, 'It Goes as it Grows.' After suffering a severe brain injury, the artist is rebuilding cognitive function; recovering bits of his past self as he invents the new one by making provisional sculptures. (1) He works simply with found material: plywood, cardboard, paper mache and paint; recreating specific memories or realizing dream forms in three dimensions. He draws, as some people write in a diary, daily recording images and shapes on a large piece of paper, keeping a running list of observed, significant objects, exercising and reaffirming his memory. He returns to the drawing many times in the space of a month, noting the images and people they are associated with, reweaving the web of connections.



Raphael Rubinstein describes provisional artists as making work that looks “casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling. In different ways, they all turn away from ‘strong’ painting for something that seems to constantly risk inconsequence or collapse.”(2) Pitt’s work is provisional because each art effort functions to provide a temporary stronghold against chaos, making the aesthetic choice to avoid ‘strong’ painting or sculpture less central for him. James builds, lists, collects and groups visual information, evading forgetfulness, while his peers erase, deface, resist finish and embrace awkwardness.



“Swell” is two inches thick, painted a flat dark blue and made by cutting an organic shape out of plywood twice, then gluing the two versions together. Just as a mental picture or invented character doesn’t match the original model perfectly, the two pieces emphasize differences and the seam between them. Surface nicks and scratches punctuate unity of form and color, creating a unique, self-contained yet empty entity, an actor on a stage. I’m reminded of Anton Chekhov’s humorous character descriptions, such as this excerpt from his short story called “In the Ravine.”

“In the village of Shikaovo lived two dressmakers, sisters, belonging to the Flagellant sect. The new clothes for the wedding were ordered from them, and they often came to try them on, and stayed a long while drinking tea. They were making Varvara a brown dress with black lace and bugles on it, and Aksinya a light green dress with a yellow front, with a train. When the dressmakers had finished their work Tsybukin paid them not in money but in goods from the shop, and they went away depressed carrying parcels of tallow candles and tins of sardines which they did not in the least need, and when they got out of the village into the open country they sat down on a hillock and cried.”(3)

Chekhov briefly describes then drops the dressmakers’ tale, it has no direct bearing on the plot. Quoting A. P. Chudakov, Harold Bloom states; “Chekov inserted details functionally irrelevant in the narrative, but pointing to the broad open context of the open world; he supposedly favored the incidental in order to reject the positivist view of the world as a rationally and neatly organized system...” (4) Likewise, Provisional Art rejects “permanence and virtuosity,...carefully planned-out compositions and layered meanings,...artistic authority and creative strength,... all the qualities that make the fine arts “fine.”(5) “Swell” is a secondary character, short on time and development, its chief purpose is to establish mood. As a Provisional Artist, James places the “low,” un-heroic, failed, temporary or arbitrary in the foreground. Where Chekhov displays an “absence...of any desire to convince” along with “natural, seemingly artless actuality---casual and random in appearance...” (6), and Provisional Art considers ‘great’ painting impossible... presumptuous or inappropriate—maybe even obscene...”(7); James Pitt produces un-heroic objects and unremarkable moments, noticing things that intriguingly never plot a story; creating like Chekhov, “infinitely fine and truthful sequences of mood.....permit(ing) us to live, everywhere.”(8)

#### notes

(1) Romer Young Gallery, ( formerly Ping Pong Gallery), Press Release for Show Oct 29-Dec 4 2010.

(2) Raphael Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting,” Art in America, May 2009, p 123.

(3) Anton Chekhov, “Ward 6 and Other Stories,” Constance Garnett trans., ( NY: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003) p. 310.

(4) Harold Bloom, “Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Anton Chekhov—New Edition,” (NY, Infobase, 2009) p. 10.

(5) Rubinstein, page 123.

(6) Conrad Aiken, "Collected Criticism----formerly A Reviewer's ABC,"  
(NY, Oxford Univ. Press, 1968) p.149-150.

(7) Rubinstein, p. 129.

(8) Aiken, p. 153.