

JONATHAN KAISER: BLIND ARCADE

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“Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world.”

Arthur Schopenhauer¹

In his 3rd Floor Emerging Artist Series exhibition *Blind Arcade*, artist Jonathan Kaiser engages visual and cognitive perception of viewers as they move through his site-specific installation. Consisting primarily of wooden arch structures that successively diminish in size across the length of the narrow exhibition space, this work creates an optical illusion; inviting consideration of this altered environment and one’s own position within it. Kaiser states his own early experiences in interacting with sculpture led to a sense of “transformed reality, and by standing in its presence I felt transformed too.”² The arch, serves as a functional architectural structure, a triumph over gravity, and an iconic symbol of power and passage. Through deliberate emphasis on scale, Kaiser’s arches create a more intimate interaction with these structures and the spaces they alter.

While the arch as an architectural form can be used an elegant design feature, in this exhibition, Kaiser himself builds these structures using surplus wood from the Rochester Art Center basement. He appreciates the discoveries revealed through attention to process and through the use of simple, found materials. With an experiential learning approach to the construction of new works, he is open to creating “tangential artifacts” along the way. The arches are accompanied by small, improvised sculptures and found objects that further obfuscate the work from any notion of a simple linear passageway to a known destination. Instead of propelling one to take a straight walk under decorative arches, there is an overall enhanced sense of altered space. Kaiser, who is also a musician, is aware of the possibilities of built environments, even through sound. He is interested in the layering of sensory experiences that can envelope a person within a space, and challenges those who interact with his work to reflect on how their own perception—visual, mental, spatial—transforms their experience with the work and the environment it inhabits.

Kaiser's nonfunctional (from a traditional architectural structure standpoint) arches, whose scale and placement intentionally play with spatial perception, can be considered in relation to the work of contemporary artist Martin Puryear, and in particular his famous sculpture *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (1996). Puryear's "ladder," made from an ash tree, hovers above the ground ascending upward, but with a narrowing of the rungs such that the overall height of the floating sculpture is difficult to comprehend. In a 2003 interview, Puryear explored this aspect of his work:

Making a work that had a kind of artificial perspective, a forced perspective—an exaggerated perspective that made it appear to recede into space faster than, in fact, it does. That really was what the work was about for me, this kind of artificial perspective . . . Anyone looking at it knows that the tip of it is not as far away as the artist is telling you it could be. This is not a new device. It was used in the Renaissance a lot . . . And so, it really is a question of the view from where you start and the end, the goal . . . the whole notion of where you start, and where you want to get to, and how far away it really is. And if it's possible to get there, given the circumstances that you're operating within.³

Similarly, Kaiser's installation invites playful engagement with space and consideration of its truth while it tricks the eye, and lends contemplation of where one wants to be within it.

Because of the time-limited nature of this installation, the impermanence of these arches is also an interesting component of Kaiser's work. For him, the classical style of arch forms might be associated with monuments and other constructions of historical importance. The fact that these temporary formations are built within a more permanent building space creates a conceptual and material tension. Again, cognizance of process and intentional focus on the moment matter to Kaiser, and he has compared site-specific installation with the time and logistical steps necessary to create a music performance—transporting and setting up equipment only to tear it all down again minutes later at show's end. Yet in those transitory moments, surrounded by a created environment of altered space and perception, one can expand a personal awareness.

– Kris Douglas

1. Schopenhauer, Arthur. (1851) *Studies in Pessimism: The Essays*

2. In conversation with the author, January, 2014.

3. *Art21* Interview: Martin Puryear. *Abstraction and "Ladder for Booker T. Washington."* Published Sept. 16, 2003, accessed Feb. 23, 2014. <http://www.art21.org/texts/martin-puryear/interview-martin-puryear-abstraction-and-ladder-for-booker-t-washington>

JONATHAN KAISER IN CONVERSATION WITH KRIS DOUGLAS

Kris Douglas: The painter Ad Reinhardt once said that "Sculpture is something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting." I disagree with this denouncement of sculpture for countless reasons, as I imagine you do given your interest in direct encounters between yourself, the work, and the viewer. What is compelling to you about a physical, dimensional, or spatial experience?

Jonathan Kaiser: Both of my parents are painters, and I grew up going to a lot of art exhibitions as a child. I won't say I was dragged along, but let's just say I was a reluctant attendee at times. I grew to appreciate looking at pictures over time, but maybe I took them for granted at first because I was around them so much. On the other hand, I remember being immediately fascinated with three-dimensional work because it wasn't just an ocular experience—it was present in my immediate reality. I could walk around it or crawl under it. It wasn't just a window into another world. Its very existence transformed reality; and, by standing in its presence, I felt transformed too. I think I'm also describing the qualities that attracted me to music, and my work as a musician is another major influence on how I think about visual art, or any creative work. When you play music, you're building up these layers of sound—it's spatial and temporal material—and you're very conscious that the audience inhabits it with you. It's hard for me to think of an artwork as an abstract and autonomous object. A human body was involved with its creation, and other human bodies will encounter it in other contexts. It is that proximity where the work proves to be interesting or not.

KD: You frequently use modest materials in your works, resulting in what some may describe as a DIY aesthetic. This is obviously a conscious and conceptual decision, one that mitigates any "slickness" to the work. What does your material selection and method of construction bring to the finished piece?

JK: I understand your reference, but I don't like the idea of DIY being an aesthetic; that implies a kind of contrived sloppiness that exists to create a fashionable "look" regardless of the actual conditions of production. I value the idea of self-

reliance and being actively creative in how we live our everyday lives—regardless of what ones aesthetic taste is. I greatly admire skilled makers and craftspeople of all kinds, and I also think that making simple things out of necessity or as a hobby is a beautiful practice. DIY as a value? Okay. DIY as an aesthetic? Sounds like a marketing tactic to me.

We live in a society where manufactured goods are everywhere, but their production generally happens outside of our view and outside of our borders often under appalling labor conditions. Some of these objects look amazing, but thinking about how they came to exist is depressing. I made a bench for my apartment out of wood that I found in the alley. It might be a little asymmetrical and discolored, but it's sturdy; and its origins make it as beautiful to me as any chair from the store. I've never started a project with the intention of making it look poorly made. I try to make things as well as I can within the limitations imposed by resources, a given set of parameters, and my own knowledge base.

For me, making art is always a learning experience and an experimental process that is bound to surprise. Every art work usually involves me attempting something I've never done before or not knowing if my idea is even possible. I am fascinated by challenges and the phenomena of progression reflected in the myriad of decisions that need to be made with each project. This process sometimes generates some tangential artifacts that might end up being more interesting than the original goal, and that is rewarding.

KD: How does this relate to your interest in historical visual art movements of such as Fluxus and Arte Povera, for instance?

JK: I saw the Arte Povera survey at the Walker right after I finished college. At the time, I did not feel much of an affinity for the sculpture I was seeing, but that exhibition inspired me. The work was simple but without the sort of bleak opacity I associated with minimalism. It incorporated objects that were familiar or fragile but without sacrificing a commitment to concept. This work drew me in because I could see how these particular artists were asking social and political questions as well as spatial ones.

KD: In thinking about prior artistic movements, are you attempting to build a material/aesthetic connection to earlier work, or are you also challenging the artistic and institutional norms of today?

JK: My affinity to previous movements is more conceptual than visual. I don't spend a lot of time looking at sculpture for ideas. Visual stimulus for my work is derived from experiencing everyday life. I walk around the city and take pictures of things that seem odd or interesting like the hole someone cut in their fence or the scaffolding on a building. Or, conceptually, I'll hear a word and look it up

on Wikipedia, and it will lead me to six other words; and, before I know it, I'm conducting research I would never have previously imagined.

Considering work from Fluxus or Arte Povera is exciting to me because I see a value placed on risk-taking, inventive use of limited resources, and a sense of humor. I aspire more to these values than to a certain set of materials or aesthetics.

KD: Does that relate to your thoughts about art as commodity or its perceived role in the social hierarchy?

JK: Yes...

KD: When observing large-scale sculpture or sculptural installations, the viewer may assume them to be permanent. In producing site-specific installations that exist for a relatively short period of time, you remove this grounded sense of permanence. What is your interest in the ephemeral experience for the viewer?

JK: Large-scale, temporary installations have been happening since the 1960s and hopefully have informed audiences that this is a viable way of working. Perhaps the classical arch forms I've chosen are the types of monumental shapes we associate with the permanence of historical architecture and preservation interests. That tension is an important component to this installation.

Ultimately, you can see a lot of evidence of life and activity and potential for change in an object that is ephemeral. Something that's truly made to last forever has a heavier aura to it. Someday I hope I'll be ready to try to make something that actually lasts forever. But at the moment, I'm fixated on how many illusions we have about what lasts and what doesn't. There are so many "disposable" products that will last nearly forever in a landfill even though we think we've made them go away. There are brand new housing developments that fill with mold in a matter of years and become unlivable. And our computer data sometimes seems eternal and light as a feather, but it's dependent on a massive physical network of hardware and electrical generators that we rarely see. For now, I'm more interested in making things that can't possibly last, as much as we might like them to.

KD: You utilize the symbolic arch structure, an architectural and design element with an incredibly long and culturally rich history. Can you elucidate on your imagining and realizing the arch as a device or your intention in its use?

JK: I'm interested in the arch because it has this dual identity. On one hand, it's a functional opening and quite an elegant one at that. It uses the force of gravity to create a stable opening where a right-angle would collapse under its own weight. So, even in its most basic form, it's performing this balancing act that seems quite magical. Maybe it's because of this air of gravity-defying magic

that it has taken on a symbolic identity as a point of entry, a portal from outside to inside, and from known to unknown (or vice versa.) As such, it's used as a non-functional decorative element or a free-standing monumental form. One might say that the arch has evolved from a necessary construction technique to a visual signifier of power, accomplishment, or historical authority. Monuments like the Arc de Triomphe (Paris) or the Gateway Arch (St. Louis) transcend architectural function to serve as symbolic points of transition in the historical narratives of nations. The arch is part of an iconography of antiquity that is inextricably tangled with notions about Western civilization and the pedigree of the institutions associated with them: churches, temples, museums, libraries, and entire nation-states.

Blind Arcade is a series of arches illustrating perspective. I wanted to see if I could re-discover the grand arch on a personal scale to remind myself of its humble origin as a carefully assembled pile of stones (or in my case, a pile of surplus wood from the Rochester Art Center's basement.) I wanted to spend some time alone with a simple, but loaded icon, and share that with viewers. Going back to our discussion about self-reliance, I wanted to make a sort of personal-scale architecture of contemplation.

KD: Your construction plan demonstrates an interest in elongating the visual distance of the gallery space. Does this reinforce the notion of experiential versus static work?

JK: I don't want to set up a dichotomy between experiential and static; I think any artwork can be experiential. Hopefully the type of optical illusion I'm playing with serves as a kind of invitation to investigate the space of the room, and consider the scale of one's body within it.

I'm actually reconstructing the visual distance of the space in a physically compressed form; *Blind Arcade* appears to be as long as the gallery; but, if one walks around it, it is obviously much shorter. It is a gradual miniaturization of reality based on a literal interpretation of the gallery's dimensions through a one-point perspective drawing—a process that creates the illusion of depth and three-dimensionality on a flat surface. Italian architect Filippo Brunelleschi first demonstrated one-point perspective in the early 15th century. This was a crucial step in the interconnection between the visual arts and mathematics in Western thought. More broadly, I would argue it helped to solidify our cultural associations between the visual and the rational. Seeing is believing. The rules of perspective -and later the coordinate system of mapping proposed by Descartes -- formed the basis for a conception of physical space as an objective reality, rather than the phenomenological construct of an individual viewer. Ironically, the same sciences of geometrical representation that seem to affirm a stable and

objectively mappable reality is used to simulate virtual spaces that exist only in digital form, to produce convincing forgeries, or even to alter physical objects. The boundaries between physical and representational realities are increasingly fluid, and most of us have experiences that are influenced by the cognitive architectures of the digital as much as by the physical architectures we inhabit.

Keeping in mind that a perspective drawing could be the simplest form of virtual space, I set out to interpret it in reverse, converting the 2D illusion to actual 3D. And, of course, I wanted to do it wrong.

Kris Douglas, Chief Curator, Rochester Art Center

Image: Jonathan Kaiser, *Blind Arcade* (gallery sketch), 2013, graphite on paper, 14 x 17 inches.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jonathan Kaiser is an artist whose work crosses boundaries between the worlds of music, fine art, and cinema. He spent four years touring and recording as cellist with the band Dark Dark Dark, with whom he co-wrote and performed live film scores at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art; ZERO1 Biennial, San Jose; Socrates Sculpture Park, NYC; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. In addition to his ongoing work as a composer and performer, he has contributed artworks to group and collaborative exhibitions at Intermedia Arts, Minneapolis; EFA Project Space, NYC; MU Eindhoven, The Netherlands; Mass MOCA, North Adams; and others. He received an MFA from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, and a BA from Macalester College, Saint Paul.

3RD FLOOR EMERGING ARTIST SERIES

Rochester Art Center continually strives to engage visitors of all ages in the creation, contemplation, and appreciation of the visual arts. As a non-collecting institution, the Art Center focuses its efforts on presenting temporary exhibitions throughout the year featuring established local, national, and international artists, as well as emerging artists from diverse backgrounds working in a variety of media.

In 2004, Rochester Art Center initiated the *3rd Floor Emerging Artist Series*—an exhibition program dedicated to promising young artists working in the state of Minnesota. Since its inception, the series has reflected shifting trends in contemporary artistic practice and production, and has helped to facilitate the creation of new bodies of work in a variety of media including photography, installation, sound, painting, drawing, sculpture, and film. Now in our tenth year, the *3rd Floor Emerging Artist Series* continues to support emerging artists and to provide a dedicated forum for the exhibition of new work.

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