

The Trials of Innovative Process

In the past I've described the way I work as PROCESS oriented. This simply means that the most important factor in the evolution of each artwork is determined by a combination of material used, exploration of the possible ways to use and /or combine materials, experimentation, testing, artistic focus and solving problems of design or concept. Not unlike my friends in the scientific world, my artwork often takes me into new areas of study as I seek answers to help work out a creative vision.

Often, working this way presents unexpected revelations, sometimes finding new inventive uses for materials. But, exploring new directions can lead to unexpected failures, or technical difficulties as well. Key in these bipolar incidences is my tendency to develop ideas derived from my experiences outside the studio using building & hardware supplies more common in the trades. Commonly, for me, sources of art media come from the lumber yard or the hardware store, not necessarily an art supply store. Consequently, materials that I choose are more economical in many cases but need to be developed in uniquely art oriented ways. Because of my understanding of historical and contemporary art trends as well as the advantage of a fully equipped studio workshop, my years of experience with hand and power tools have led to a skilled knowledge of carpentry techniques including assembly procedures common to furniture or sculpture.

Recently, you may have been following my largest studio project. It is finally nearing completion after months of work. I pictured those months of work in last months newsletter, but I did not detail the most difficult or problematic aspects of the piece. Neither did I describe the conceptual development of this work from beginning to end, so knowing how I got from the start to the finished version explains the essence of my oeuvre. Here is how this artist's mind works... (This will probably not be easily read on your iPhone... I apologize for the small font size...)

- A. I look around my studio for remnant construction materials that I can use to make art. (I am thinking of wood scraps from previous projects both artistic and otherwise, and am considering constructing more wall hung reliefs that would be directly inspired by the found materials themselves.)
- B. I am Interested in somehow using a large amount of scrap material to develop an organic construction that is not symmetrical is less reliant on a regular geometric frame.
- C. After selecting some Masonite white board blanks (that have been lying around my studio for over 20 years!) I decide to cut these 24" X 36" panels into an assortment of sizes and shapes. After starting some experiments I begin sawing hundreds of small pieces on my table saw. I spend numerous hours (3 times) in order to obtain enough pieces!) At one point my saw motor chokes on the fine sawdust being generated and won't run, requiring me to take the motor to a electric motor company to have it cleaned and refurbished. For the rest of the cutting I enclose the motor with fine mesh fabric to help filter out the dust.
- D. I decide that each piece, regardless of size, has to be hand sanded to soften the sharp edge of the shape and allow the brown Masonite core to form an outline border that I accidentally find more aesthetically interesting. This occurred while I was trying to remove printed lines from the white surface. These are the most tedious hours and days of the whole process.
- E. My initial explorations are like arranging dominos on a table; trying to see what kinds of design possibilities arise from the 9 different shapes I have created. These are now separated into boxes containing hundreds of pieces of each given shape from ½ inch square to 4 X 4 inches.
- F. To be able to try all kinds of solutions I need to set up lots of folding tables in my studio, so that I don't have to crawl around on the floor to test ideas out. I have recently obtained five folding tables in a trade for artwork with the owners of a local gallery. Soon I have every table in the studio set up with two or more of these test experiments.
- G. I start and destroy numerous test experiments and begin to evolve actual assemblages which I glue to a backing board. At first I am gluing to plywood or high density MDF panels, but now I revisit an tried and true technique that I have used before. (see J. following)
- H. I find myself seduced by the symmetry of these backing boards at first and am earnestly trying to find a more "organic" way to work with the symmetrical shapes themselves to design patterns that are somehow a reflection of my creative process and personal aesthetic. (Some are more successful than others... but I let them sit for a while so I can let the results "percolate" in my mind).
- I. After weeks of exploring rather one-dimensional experiments, I begin to try stacking the pieces in different ways to develop a higher relief effect and I begin to see some possibilities I had not seen before.
- J. I purchase five luan-faced hollow core interior doors and cut each one in half to create ten 36" X 40" panels. (When cut, each panel requires a filler strip be glued into the open end of the hollow panel... this takes a few days and lots of clamps!)
- K. I layout a 2" grid in pencil on the surface of each panel. This will help me align all the pieces vertically and horizontally. Since all of the pieces are cut to proportions related to the others or fractions thereof (like children' building blocks) they can be arranged in endless combinations and compositions. All the shapes are either square or rectangular and one is a large square with a rounded corner.
- L. Based on some of my preliminary explorations with these shapes I start to develop a concept in my mind that will be a diptych, a triptych, or 6 to 9 panels combined to make a larger work. My initial horizontal test panels begin to remind me of cityscapes as seen from satellite images. But these are metaphorical cityscapes. The result of my "research" is an idiom that reminds me of suburban sprawl, and at this point leads me to develop a very large sprawling work that can span 9 panels and a 9' X 10' space.
- M. Starting with the middle panel, I spend a couple of months gluing and arranging the pieces, gradually moving from the central starting point to the left panel, then right, then above, then below, etc. This is tedious, but enjoyable work.
- N. Finally having every piece glued in place on all nine panels laid horizontal on a large collection of portable tables, the work has only just begun!
- O. In my minds eye I see all of these pieces coated in a high gloss finish, and set against a totally textured and matte background. This contrast is important to my vision. However, there is only one way to paint a consistent finish on a surface so large and irregular; it has to be applied with a paint gun... which I do not have. So, I purchase one.
- P. Testing this new tool in the studio, despite my industrial exhaust fan and spray booth, proves intolerable. Because the pieces are too large, the over spray permeates the space, so all spraying must be done outside. Unfortunately, the nine assembled panels require four or five coats to attain the gloss I am looking for, which means 36 trips outside and back along with drying time in between each set of nine. I use my studio easel to support them for spraying, but carrying them back into the studio alone requires care so that they don't get smeared. Therefore, they have to be held at arm's length when they are moved from easel to drying table. Only once was I able to have someone help with this process... and my back is still sore. This takes a few weeks... especially after my brand new HVLP Spray Gun fails and has to be sent back and replaced. In the end... I am very happy with the results!
- Q. But... I am not sure I am happy with the artwork itself! I decide to do some more research using the web to explore aerial views of cities around the world. I am "blown away" when I come across images of the slums of Mumbai, and Caracas, and cities in Africa. I am awakened to a new concept that stretches the meaning of this artwork. By adding an elemental contrast between the formality of the metaphorical city I have built, and surrounding it with metaphorical slums constructed of thousands of tiny pieces of the same material turned upside down and arranged without a structural plan, I will have suggested a recognizable contrast between the glittering city of the haves and the earth toned border of have-nots. (It has become an abstract and/or political expression of a global dichotomy).
- R. I cut thousands of ½" X ½" squares and spend two weeks adding them to the piece at the same time I am texturing the background. Tedium saved by music in the studio while I work!
- S. Meanwhile, I have been carefully collecting sawdust as I was cutting the Masonite into approximately 10,000± pieces. About 8 gallons worth. I intend to fill in the background with this material, which will harmonize as well as contrast with the glossy shapes that form the composition.
- T. In the past I have tried an assortment of adhesives for loose sand or particulates and had poor results, but finally I have come upon the perfect product: Acrylic Industrial Caulking. It has the advantage of a slow drying time, good viscosity, easy brush-ability, virtually no odor and is inexpensive! It comes in assorted colors so I choose black and order a dozen tubes from my local lumber yard.
- U. For each panel it takes me about a day to brush the caulking into the background spaces by filling small sections at a time. This is followed by sifting sawdust on top, and using a soft brush to tamp the sawdust into the caulking for complete adhesion. The remaining loose sawdust particles are then vacuumed up into my small shop vacuum to be recycled again.
- V. It has been eight months since this project began. I am ready to prepare it for display. Up to now it has only been seen horizontally, now I want to mount it on the wall. I have engineered a modular framework for doing just that, but one that also can be disassembled for transport to gallery or exhibit. The frame is constructed of 5/4" X 3½" premium pine boards that are lap jointed and through-bolted at each of 12 intersections. Four boards run horizontal and four vertical. The overall dimension is 120" X 120". The actual dimension of the artwork is 108" H X 120" W but the frame is designed raise the artwork 12" above the floor and lean back 5° toward the top. This is to help capture reflections in the glossy surfaces of the piece.
- W. Anchoring each of the nine panels to the frame is done using dowel pins that match up with holes in the back of each panel and requires the help of my son Greg, who helps me get each panel correctly aligned and holes drilled. At last the work seems to be nearing completion. But, I am unhappy with the remaining loose sawdust that still remains after the adhesive caulking has dried. Even more vacuuming does not solve the problem which I feel is unacceptable.
- X. I decide that I need to find a way to fully adhere all the loose sawdust. My solution, after testing, is to mix a 9 to 1 solution of water to acrylic matte medium and brush it over all the background sections of my project. The result is perfect! The look of the textured background remains the same, but I no longer have to worry about loose particles of sawdust falling off the artwork. *One problem is unforeseen however.* If I allow too much time for the liquid mixture to dry, the water is absorbed through the sides of the Masonite shapes and causes them to swell and/or distort the finished surface. After the first instance of this happening, and some worrisome moments, I find a simple solution... accelerate the drying time from overnight to less than an hour using fans. So, with all the remaining panels finished without further incident I can reassemble the work on it's frame!
- Y. With the exception of some minor tweaks and touch-ups...
- Z. It is DONE.

