

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Interview with Bridgette Mayer and Michael Stifel, January 2016

BM: Hi Mike, I am very excited to open your Vault Project Space Exhibition in Philadelphia in a few weeks. Thank you for taking some time to answer a few questions so that the public can get to know you a little better. **Could you please tell us about your background and how you decided to become an artist?**

MS: I probably decided to become an artist while I was in high school. I had always enjoyed drawing and making things, but in my teens I attended classes at Carnegie Mellon University's Pre-College art program. While in that program, I encountered professional artists for the first time and got to spend time with peers who took art very seriously. It made making art seem like a viable long-term possibility. I also received a lot of encouragement, which made pursuing a career in art seem like a good idea.

BM: **Where did you grow up and how did this influence your work?**

MS: I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania during its industrial collapse of the 70s and 80s. I think I subliminally absorbed something of an industrial aesthetic from growing up surrounded with the products of heavy industry. I'm pretty sure I also get my obsessive interest in fasteners and hardware from Pittsburgh's ironwork. My father and his friends were also constantly working on cars and motorcycles and generally fixing things that made me very interested in understanding how things work and mechanical systems in general.

BM: **What is the general process of making your work?**

MS: Sometimes I will literally have a vision of something and then I try to figure out how to make it. Sometimes it changes and evolves and becomes quite different, and sometimes it ends up being more or less exactly what popped into my head. I also work thematically. Once I get interested in a particular general topic I will pick different aspects of the topic and make work that addresses those points. I also tend to work in series. I will often make several pieces that deal with the same topic in slightly different ways so that I can tease apart things and explore nuance a little bit.

BM: **How do you decide on your materials?**

MS: Materiality is crucially important to my work and my process. I choose materials for each piece based on what the piece is about and what I need the material to do. Every material has its own physical and aesthetic qualities so often the material choice is based on what I need a particular part to do, but there's generally some "wiggle room" that allows me to choose within a range of materials and finishes to get to my aesthetic goal. As I'm using industrial materials quite often I also try to keep their context in mind: what is this material usually used for and how is it utilized. This knowledge allows me to either use or subvert the material contextually for effect. For example, juxtaposing

BRIDGETTE **MAYER** GALLERY

polished brass with matte, sandblasted aluminum or adding a dissimilar material like the wooden wings against the metal of the overall machine.

BM: With your large sculpture that we are exhibiting, what is new or a shift from your last series of works?

MS: The really new thing about this particular piece is that I'm using live steam for the first time. In the past I've always run my engines with compressed air. This is a little safer, but it has a lot of logistical difficulties attached to it and it's less satisfying to me because the pieces end up not being self-contained. It's an exciting step forward, but it hasn't been exactly easy for me to get everything to work the way I want it to. My first kinetic pieces were run with electric motors that I either bought or salvaged. That became unsatisfying because I was making everything else in the piece and then sticking a manufactured motor onto it. My answer to this was to start designing and building my own steam engines. Now I'm trying to move that idea forward by generating my own steam. It opens up a lot of exciting possibilities for the future.

BM: What inspires your work?

MS: I am inspired by functionality and materiality. I love looking at machines and functional objects and figuring out how they work and how they are made. There's something tremendously satisfying about visually deconstructing these objects to determine how the parts fit together, what they do, and why the particular materials are used in the ways that they are. If you look carefully at anything, you start to see layers of complexity and a process of evolution that goes back a very long way. Humans have been using tools since before we were human and that chain of technology is really compelling to me.

BM: What contemporary artists are you inspired by?

MS: I'm not sure how contemporary they are but I'm a big fan of Martin Puryear and Tim Hawkinson. I love Puryear's craftsmanship and thorough attention to detail. His work always seems singular and complete when I look at it - it's very satisfying in the way that Bach is satisfying. Everything is exactly where it needs to be. I feel like Hawkinson and I see the world in a similar kind of way in that we both look under the surface of the way things work and deconstruct functionality. I think we re-construct things in a very different way so that the end result is pretty dissimilar but I think that when we're both about half way through we're in a similar place.

BM: What do people not know about you or would be surprised to know about you?

MS: Even though my work tends to be very resolved and finished I can't work in a clean and uncluttered space. Most people are very surprised when they see the environment my work emerges from. I guess it is part of the process of deconstructing functionality that makes me spread tiny parts out

BRIDGETTE **MAYER** GALLERY

all over the place and then slowly bring them back together. Everything is super organized; it just doesn't look that way.

BM: What would you like the viewers to take away from the show?

MS: I want people to see a love of the beauty of function and the joy I find in taking the time to make exquisite objects that create a little moment of quiet complexity.